

Apprehending Female Masculinity: Nationalism, Liberalization
and Gender Nonconformity in North India

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Abstract

Apprehending Female Masculinity: Nationalism, Liberalization and Gender Nonconformity in North India brings postcolonial studies and queer studies in conversation in order to shed light on the otherwise overlooked subject of queer female-masculinity in contemporary India. Speaking back to the inherent hierarchies of rescue-able and narrate-able lives within homonationalist development models of GLBT social movements, this dissertation argues for a theoretical and political investment in the failed subjectivity of masculine women and transmen. Female masculinity in India embodies a double failure: that of a racialized, postcolonial subjectivity that is perpetually one step outside of modernity and for whom subjecthood itself is foreclosed, as well as that of queer masculinity that is only ever seen as a failed copy of dominant, Hindu nationalist masculinity. And yet the very failure of postcolonial female masculinity becomes the condition of possibility for imagining a new terrain of gender/sexual politics.

I examine media and cultural production (documentaries, literary anthologies, ethnography, and pop-culture) to conduct a multi-sited review of how masculine women and transmen negotiate cultural citizenship. By providing an archive of gender nonconforming aesthetic practices in post-liberalization India (1991–present), this project illuminates the ways in which masculine women simultaneously embody and resist Hindu nationalist and global standards of neoliberal “modern” masculinity. The broader implications of the set of arguments presented here serve to explore the contradictions within identity formation in globalization and reconstitute notions of the political. The

aim is to demonstrate how globalizing models of gender/sexual identity formation may be unevenly established as well as challenged by the aesthetic practices and self-making performances of gender nonconforming subjectivities that have not yet been taxonomized.

Table of Contents

TABLE OF CONTENTS	VIII
TABLE OF FIGURES	1
CHAPTER 1	35
INTRODUCTION	35
COLONIAL MASCULINITY AND THE CHARGE OF EFFEMINACY	48
HINDU REVIVALISM, PHYSICAL CULTURE, AND A CONTENTIOUS MODERNITY	58
CRISIS IS AS “CRISIS” DOES	73
CHAPTER 2	81
“HE CALLS ME ‘GIRL’/I CALL HIM ‘FATSO’”: DEVELOPING FEMALE MASCULINITY AS AN ANALYTICAL LENS	81
PRELUDE	81
INTRODUCTION	82
WHO CAN SPEAK OF MASCULINITY?	85
“HUM BHI UNKE SAATH HARAMI BAN JAATE HAIN”/ “WE TOO BECOME BASTARDS WITH THEM”	93
FEMALE MASCULINITY AND INTERSECTIONALITY	102
CHAPTER 3	121
QUEER FIXATIONS: MILAN SINGH, FALGUNI PATHAK AND THE IMBRICATIONS OF QUEER AND NATION	121
QUEER FIXATION AND FIXITY	125
NATIONALISM IN THE TIME OF LIBERALIZATION	133
MILAN SINGH AND THE MANAGEMENT OF DIFFERENCE	138
MEDIA PRACTICES, NOSTALGIA AND THE POLITICS OF VOICE	147
WHAT’S QUEER ABOUT FALGUNI PATHAK?	155
IDEOLOGICAL FIXING AND UNFIXING	157
AMBIGUOUS MODALITIES OF SUBVERSION	162
CONCLUSION	169
TRANSMASCULINE IDENTITY, TERMINOLOGY, AND CONCLUDING QUESTIONS	173
TRANS SURGERIES AND THE BLOOD SUCKING TICK	176
REFERENCES	183

Table of Figures

Image 1 Milan Singh singing Mohammad Rafi's Nazar Na Lag Jaye Kisi Ki Raahon Mein for DD New Year's Eve Program, 1989 Doordarshan. Screenshot retrieved from Doordarshan/Prasar Bharti archives.....	122
Image 2 :Falguni Pathak, on the cover of <i>Best of Falguni Pathak</i> , a retrospective cassette of her music.....	123

Introduction

Who can speak of masculinity? In Indian public discourse, masculinity as a category often acquires intelligibility as something that is the negation or absence of femininity and femaleness, and only in recent years do we see an analytical investment in the making of men as men. Following postcolonial historian Mrinalini Sinha's call to "give masculinity a history,"¹ a small but groundbreaking body of scholarship on masculinity in India has emerged that attends to the gap in the historiography of masculinity, and insightfully highlights the imbrication of masculinity in other social categories like class and caste.² Histories and anthropological accounts of masculinity focusing on different geopolitical locations around the world now abound and serve to pluralize gender, women's lives and masculinity. That is to say, there is considerable scholarship that uses gender as a central analytical category in the study of different global contexts. The challenge issued by postcolonial scholarship and third world feminisms however, is to dismantle universal conceptions of gender, and study instead the ways in which the very meanings of gender alter in light of those different global

¹ Mrinalini Sinha, "Giving Masculinity a History" Some Contributions from the Historiography of Colonial India", *Gendering Colonial India: Reforms, Print, Caste and Communalism*, Charu Gupta (ed), Orient Blackswan Private Limited, New Delhi: 2012.

² See for instance, Mrinalini Sinha's *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century* (1995), Sikata Banerjee's *Make Me a Man! Masculinity, Hinduism, and Nationalism in India* (2005), Chopra and Osella's *South Asian Masculinities: Context of Change, Sites of Continuity* (2004), Sanjay Srivastava's *Sexual Sites, Seminal Attitudes: Sexualities, Masculinities and Culture in South Asia* (2004).

A more comprehensive review of this literature is presented in Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

contexts.³ This dissertation centers a subordinated *female* masculinity (masculinity embodied and performed by female persons) and positions itself at the intersection of such postcolonial feminist inquiry and western academic queer theory. Female masculinity is a useful analytical entry-point here into gender relations in the context of economic liberalization, LGBT rights discourse and contemporary nationalism in India. Stereotypical constructions of the mannish lesbian and the tomboy persist in Indian public culture and produce a sense of monstrous otherness of the lesbian and/as the masculine woman.⁴ This dissertation aims to identify alternative histories, representations and legacies of female masculinity that restore masculine women to the realm of the everyday and destabilize assumptions about gender relations in India. The literary and media texts taken up for consideration here are not all authored by or about people who consider themselves masculine women, and certainly don't all self-identify as "lesbians." However, the texts demonstrate ways in which the presence of female masculinity causes a historical and cultural dissonance that may simultaneously exceed and/or fail the modes of resistance envisaged by identity-based rights movements. The task undertaken in the following chapters is that of comprehending this dissonance as viable political work. Keen attention is paid to the changes in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) identity politics that emerge in contemporary regimes of neocolonialism, Hindu nationalism, institutional casteism and neoliberalism in India. Instead of simple dichotomies of repression versus visibility, or disempowerment versus rights, the following pages complicate dominant understandings of the political by interrogating the

³ Mrinalini Sinha, "Giving Masculinity a History" (2012)

⁴ Representations of the aggressive and masculinized lesbian women such as Minx in Shobha De's *Strange Obsession* (1994) and Tanya in Karan Razdan's film, *Girlfriend* (2004), are good examples of pop culture perceptions of lesbian women as psychotic and castrating.

ways in which gender/sexual differences, particularly female masculinity, are more and more absorbed into hegemonic systems. What are the new technologies of government and social institutions that increasingly also speak the language of LGB and now transgender rights and protection? What kinds of challenges arise from our complicities and convergences in these techniques of power, and how can they be addressed?

The term “female masculinity” was first theorized and popularized by Jack Halberstam in his book by the same name, *Female Masculinity*.⁵ In the book, Halberstam describes the term “female masculinity” (“masculinity in women”) as a “concept” that helps pry apart the naturalized relation between masculinity and maleness, and maleness and power.⁶ He conducts a path-breaking exploration of what it might mean to examine masculinity in non-males, and how might female masculinity challenge and reconfigure “dominant masculinity,” as well as its feminist and queer critiques. Halberstam proliferates the notion of female masculinity as a “masculinity without men.”⁷ Transnational and postcolonial theorists of gender have reworked this formulation to account for the continuities between “dominant” and female masculinities.⁸ This approach opens up the possibility of examining how female masculinities are implicated in and shaped by dominant masculinities: how these marginal and dominant genders, respectively, are co-constitutive. As discussed more fully in Chapter 1, in the postcolonial context of India, the specters of male masculinity are multi-layered – white male colonizer, anti-colonial masculinity, modern Hindu upper-caste nationalist masculinity,

⁵ J. Halberstam. *Female Masculinity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998. p. xi

⁶ Halberstam, (1998) p. xi

⁷ Halberstam, (1998) p. 2

⁸ K.B. Fajardo. “Transportation: Translating Filipino/Filipino American Tomboy Masculinities Through Seafaring and Migration” in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 14:2/3, Durham: Duke University Press, 2008, pp. 403-424.

globalized metrosexual masculinity, dalit masculinities and lastly, effeminate masculinity. An intersectional analysis of masculinity in India runs counter to Halberstam's early formulations, in that male masculinities are plural and divergent and cannot be dismissed as a monolithic category that is distinct from, or redundant to, conceptualizations of female masculinity. Additionally, in this project "female masculinity" does not describe a coherent empirical category with definable characteristics, but loosely speaking, pertains to people who are female born and consistently embody or identify with masculinity. Within queer communities in the US, "female masculinity" as a term has sometimes invited critiques of being biologically deterministic (in being tethered to a notion of being "female") despite attempting to describe people that are often dysphoric about those very biological characteristics. It is believed that terms like "trans*," "transman," and "genderqueer" are more respectful and attentive to such dysphoria. Nevertheless, in this dissertation, the term "female" has been retained, not to indicate any particular identification with femaleness, but to signal gender insubordination by those bodies that are deemed "wrong" or improper dwellings of masculinity, on account of biology. Terms like "butch" and "trans" that are ordinarily invoked to indicate gender nonconformity are geographically and historically specific to the US, and do not quite proliferate as identities in India. In India, the category of transman has come to describe male-identified and often medically transitioning people, which not all female-born masculine people aspire to. As a remedy, a queer feminist LBT collective in Mumbai, LABIA, recently coined the term "PAGFB" (people assigned gender female at birth) in its report on the experiences of queerness and queer

embodiment for female assigned at birth people.⁹ However, this term has come under criticism for also being biologically deterministic, not explicitly articulating masculine identification, and flattening gender conformity and nonconformity into a single category. Thus for all purposes here, “female masculinity”, with all its difficulties, does describe the tension between and among masculinities, and serves as an analytical concept rather than an empirical descriptor while still abiding by specific masculine embodiments that are otherwise overlooked.¹⁰

“Apprehending”: Beside Carceral Imaginaries

An issue that haunts the study of female masculinity in the following chapters is the ways in which contemporary LGBT politics in India has organized itself around opposing the criminalization of sodomy and furthering state protections of trans identified people within jobs, public services, and state identification documents. Specifically, the national gay and lesbian political movement has centered around article 377 of the Indian Penal Code in which sodomy is criminalized (but which is interpreted as outlawing all non-penile-vaginal sex acts, including anything that might be characterized as lesbian sex). The threat of imprisonment of LGBT people under Article 377 has, over the past fifteen or so years become the symbolic and affective thrust of demands for LGBT rights and liberation, even though the deployment of that law against

⁹ LABIA. “Breaking the Binary: Understanding concerns and realities of queer persons assigned gender female at birth across a spectrum of lived gender identities”, Bombay: LABIA, 2012

¹⁰ When describing people who embody female masculinity, I will use the term “masculine gnc” (short for masculine gender nonconforming people) instead of Halberstam’s “masculine women” in order not to uphold assumptions of identification with womanhood or femininity.

LGBT people had been rare up until 2010.¹¹ The word “apprehending” in the title of the dissertation is a gesture toward the relationship between gender/sexual nonconformity and the ongoing threat of arrest, containment and incarceration. Although the focus of organizing against 377 has been the figure of the sexually aware self-identified gay man or lesbian woman, the punitive impact of 377 has most acutely been felt by visibly gender nonconforming people, especially hijras, kothis, mannish lesbians, butches and transmen. Female masculinity has often been seen as the give-away or tell-tale sign of lesbianism which has in turn led to the surveillance and containment of gender nonconforming bodies – as in the cases of Pinki Pramanik (June 2012) and Balli (June 2007) wherein their own lovers were made to complain to the police about being deceived into same-sex relationships, due to which they both did some jail time.¹² In addition to Article 377, masculine women and transmen have been charged with abducting and kidnapping their feminine partners even when the couple has run-away together consensually to escape violence from their own families.¹³ Further, Sunil Mohan et al argue that in order to address the ways in which patriarchy and institutional misogyny specifically affect the lives of female assigned at birth queer people, one must pay attention to cases of wrongful confinement and house arrest of lesbians and transmen by family members.¹⁴

¹¹ Alok Gupta’s “The History and Trends in the Application of the Anti-Sodomy law in the Indian Courts”, *The Lawyer’s Collective* (Bombay), vol. 16, No. 7, 2002, claims that in its 140 years since the law’s inception only 131 cases have been reported.

¹² In a 2011 case, Bobby Saha (who “dressed and behaved like a man”, as the *Times of India* reported here: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/Lesbian-couple-commits-suicide/articleshow/7351197.cms>) and Pooja Mondal committed suicide due to societal disapproval of their intimate relationship. Such cases of lesbian suicide abound, in which the couple is “found out” due to the gender nonconforming female masculinity of one of the pair.

¹³ As per the report by Sunil Mohan published by Alternative Law Forum and Lesbit in 2013, “Towards Gender Inclusivity: A Study on Contemporary Concerns around Gender”, p. 50.

¹⁴ Ibid. pp. 49-50

Mohan's report argues that such cases should be brought to justice under Articles 357, 339 and 346, all of which pertain to wrongful confinement and are thus more pertinent to the LBT population than 377. It is in this way that female masculinity becomes a "captive gender," one whose existence and viability are continuously under threat of being apprehended and/or of slow death.¹⁵ Thus, seeking to decenter the juridical and carceral imaginaries of the gay and lesbian movement in India or to think "beside" them, as suggested by the title of this section, is not to suggest that masculine women or transmasculine people are unaffected by the law and its necropolitical apparatuses. Instead, this project works to challenge LGBT complicity in these apparatuses, reconfigure the queer political and imagine otherwise.

The other connotation of the term "apprehending" that informs this project is that of recognition. Above, I have explored the way in which gender nonconformity, specifically female masculinity is subject to the state's disciplinary and punitive techniques. To think beside or alongside those institutions also entails an engagement with the technologies of power that not only delimit but also produce citizenship and subjecthood through granting recognition of rights and protections. The last decade has seen an intensification of LGBT political movements and community formation in urban India, culminating in the establishment of an annual Queer Pride march in most major cities, the 2009 Delhi High Court judgment that briefly decriminalized adult, consensual homosexuality, a spectacular increase in cultural production (websites, documentaries, radio shows, literary anthologies) and social events, such as art exhibitions, book

¹⁵ I borrow the term "captive genders" from the book of the same name *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*, (2011) which notes the heightened susceptibility of gender nonconforming bodies to captivity, confinement and imprisonment within modern regimes of government.

launches and film festivals, marked LGBT and/or Queer. The media's attention to "the LGBT movement" has unfurled a new civil rights crisis in democratic politics in India where, for the first time, sexuality and sexual orientation has taken the shape of a political category through which citizenship and representation are being contested.

This concept of sexuality as an episteme and as descriptor of personhood and identity is an idea that is in the process of consolidating itself.¹⁶ In his essay "Beyond 'Sexuality' (?)" Akshay Khanna cautions against this process of identity formation and consolidation within the Indian LGBT political movement and social circles. He argues that within law (specifically Article 377 of the Indian Penal Code) "acts" are prohibited and criminalized, not "types of people."¹⁷ So where, he asks, does the notion of "sexuality" take root? For Khanna, the discourse of "human rights" that positions itself to redress homophobic discrimination and is put into circulation by queer "support groups" in India, has led to the proliferation of "sexuality." Khanna briefly theorizes the human rights paradigm as one that constructs people as "subjects" with sacred, inalienable rights. "More significantly, it enables the framing of complex power dynamics in the body, in terms of *individual* experiences"¹⁸ (emphasis mine): Khanna goes on to argue that, over time, sexuality has come to be a concept that allows people to link their desires and sexual practices to their 'selves.'¹⁹ Both in bio-medicine and in

¹⁶ The material and discursive effects of such a fabrication of sexual identity recalls Foucault's foundational theorization of the historical emergence of sexuality as identity within modern regimes of power, governance and knowledge, in *The History of Sexuality* Vol. 1. (1978)

¹⁷ Akshay Khanna, "Beyond 'Sexuality' (?)" in *Because I have a Voice: Queer Politics in India*. Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan (eds). New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2005, p. 94

¹⁸ Khanna (2005) p. 97

¹⁹ Khanna (2005) p. 97

LGBT activism, Khanna asserts, sexuality has come to be considered an aspect of personhood and has been naturalized as such. Further,

“[The] drive to deploy the framework of sexuality, to bring about its ‘recognition’ in law and policy by the state, to establish it as a framework for the redistribution of resources, power, suffering, pleasure and control over discourse in ‘civil society’ places the different worldviews in a relationship of power, of dynamism.”²⁰

The yoking of sexuality/sexual preference to the identity of citizen-subject of the nation-state has, of course, always found its elaboration within the social contract. Khanna rightly points out that the inclusion of ‘homosexuality’ to the conventional parameters of citizenry and subjecthood does not necessarily rid us of the circuit of power, control and the constitutive exclusions that inhere in such state legitimation. His assertion recalls the case of Dr. Srinivas Ramchandra Siras, a 64-year-old professor at Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) who was suspended from his position for “gross misconduct” on being “discovered” having sex with a rickshaw puller in his home in 2010.²¹ What followed was a political storm wherein LGBT activists from Aligarh, Delhi and other parts of India challenged AMU’s decisions as unconstitutional, while metropolitan news sources catapulted the case into a national controversy on the question of sexuality, “gay rights” and religious (in)tolerance of homosexuality. Upon being goaded to “fight back” against the AMU administration’s homophobia, Dr. Siras claimed that he had decided to take the VC to court on account of this “violation of [my] personal privacy. It is a violation of [my] human right and all those things...” When asked about his distress over having been outed as a homosexual to the entire nation, Dr. Siras shakes his head

²⁰ Khanna (2005) p. 94

²¹ Ashhar Ahmed Khan and Maha Siddiqui, “AMU VC had ordered sting operation on Dr. Siras”, *India Today*, April 12, 2010, Web, Accessed November 2, 2014.

dismissively and says, “It’s a passing phase. After two months or four months nobody will recognize me as a gay.”²² A few months after this interview aired, Dr. Siras was found dead in mysterious circumstances ultimately deemed to be suicide. Thus, his dismissal of this media controversy is not a case of apathy toward either religious intolerance or the question of his own privacy or sexuality. It is a sobering reminder of the gap between metropolitan, elite LGBT politicization of “gay” identity around the notions of sexual orientation and individual sexual autonomy, and the self-perceptions and/or experiences of those gender/sexually nonconforming bodies and identities that are primarily marked by differences of class, caste, religion or region, rather than sexuality. It reminds us that using ‘sexuality’ as a platform for demanding “rights” and state recognition can be a double-edged sword that might surrender already vulnerable lives to further surveillance and institutional dominance. This is especially evident in the case of bodies that are rendered hypervisible due to their nonconformity to hegemonic constructions of biology, gender, class and caste.

In the last two years, this hypervisibility has brought female masculinity into public discourse in unprecedented ways, although certainly still not *as* “female masculinity.” Specifically, the relationship between biology and gender has come under reconsideration within two distinct but crucially related spheres – gender testing within sports, and sex reassignment surgeries for transmen. Both debates simultaneously address concerns about biological determinism, medicalization and disciplining of female-assigned bodies, gender/sexual diversity, and the failure of the legal system to act on

²² Srinivas Ramchandra Siras interviewed by Barkha Dutt on “Fired for Being Gay” on *The Buck Stops Here*, NDTV, February 23, 2010. Web. Accessed November 2, 2014.
<http://www.ndtv.com/video/player/the-buck-stops-here/fired-for-being-gay/129686>

behalf of gender nonconforming people. A brief consideration of the contemporary uptake of gender nonconformity by lesbian feminists and trans activists makes more clear the relevancy of female masculinity as an important analytic for feminism in India today.

Sex/Gender Testing and the Limits of Visibility Politics

In recent years there has been a spate of news stories about female assigned-at-birth athletes who have come under scrutiny by sports authorities and the general public for their abnormally sexed/gendered bodies.²³ All three athletes excelled in regional and international competitions despite having very limited access to resources. Their public humiliation of being stripped of professional accolades, as well as any bodily autonomy or privacy (within non-consensual sex/gender tests) has garnered criticism from feminists and sports enthusiasts alike.

In a very compelling essay, “The disappearing body and Feminist thought,” Nivedita Menon addresses the naturalization of the sex binary and the ways in which the maintenance of that binary depends on disciplining female-assigned bodies, especially in sports.²⁴ Citing the cases of South African runner Caster Semenya and Indian middle-distance runner Santhi Soundarajan, she points out that due to the presence of what are perceived to be excess male characteristics (sex organs, and/or hormones, and/or genetic matter), some “not women” are perceived to have an unfair advantage in sports compared

²³ In 2007 Santhi Soundarajan, in 2012 Pinki Pramanik and in 2014 Dutee Chand have all experienced media controversies around their biological sex and their participation in competitive sports under the category and requirements for women. All three have had to give up their standing within competitive sports, and/or their athletic careers, and have undergone periods of joblessness and public shaming. Due to the particular set of charges brought against Pramanik, she was also incarcerated for a few months, and made to undergo gender tests without consent.

²⁴ Nivedita Menon, “The Disappearing Body and Feminist Thought”, Kafiya, February 18, 2011, Web, Accessed November 5, 2014. <http://kafiya.org/2011/02/18/the-disappearing-body-and-feminist-thought/>

with “real women” (quotation marks in original). Sex/gender testing is almost exclusively performed on female-assigned athletes because, Menon contends, male attributes are considered desirable and advantageous within sports. The reverse is clearly not an issue. Menon persuasively argues both that the heteronormative constructions of binary sex are slippery and uncontainable, and also that the gendered “subject position that any individual [may] take up” might have little to do with their biological sex characteristics – an important insight for feminist approaches to gendered domestic labor. While making some important connections between the sex binary and the signification of gendered bodies, Menon, however, does not seem keen to push her analysis much further to account for the ways in which the sex binary is reiterated in order to discipline gender nonconformity. She seems more content with acknowledging sexual and bodily diversity in the context of sports, than investigating why certain bodies come under medical and legal scrutiny in the first place.

While “over-performance” by female-assigned athletes is the oft-quoted reason for increased scrutiny of certain bodies, one must account for the other types of abnormalities and improperness these athletes might inhabit. All athletes named here, including Semenya, are poor or working class and have fought against socio-economic pressures in order to compete in international sports. The instances of sex/gender testing being brought on to these bodies by fellow competitors are even more evidence of the desire to put certain bodies that are not seen as belonging in the elite sports event, in their place, so to speak.²⁵ What also seems to follow inevitably, in order to allay any

²⁵ The stories of Semenya, Pramanik, and 1970s American runner Helen Stephens, all reveal that race, class and gender were equal factors in the criminalization and medicalization of these bodies, as

suspensions about sexual normalcy in such bodies, is an anxiety to prove that the athlete is not just a “woman” but “womanly.” Caster Semenya’s post-controversy photoshoots with longer hair, feminine clothing and lipstick, albeit awkward and severely out of character, were meant precisely to squash any doubts about her gender on account of her masculine embodiment and mannerisms, not only her over-performance. Thus, what remains unthought in Menon’s piece is an intersectional understanding of the bodies that are routinely reduced to their biology. In letting her interrogation of sex write over questions of gender nonconformity, Menon somewhat depoliticizes gender nonconformity into an exposition of biological diversity that seems to occur separate from other social and material experiences. In order to account for the lived experience in a biologically nonconforming body, one must account for the intersection of caste and class vulnerabilities that make such bodies more prone to hypervisibility, medicalization and criminalization.

This hypervisibility and its fallout becomes more explicit within the context of the LGBT movement in India which has based a large part of its argument against the criminalization of sodomy around the state’s responsibility to protect every individual’s right to privacy. Adopting this familiar human rights argument for the rights of LGBT people of India, the Naz Foundation and Voices Against 377 (a national collective of lawyers and activists organizing legal campaigns against Section 377 of the Indian penal Code) frequently cited the right to privacy that is violated with the threat of 377: “We want the State to get out of our bedrooms.” Such a conceptualization of sexuality and

overperformance. For further intersectional analysis of gender tests on female-assigned athletes, see: Matt Slater, “Sport and Gender: A History of Bad Science and ‘Biological Racism’”, BBC.COM, October 2, 2014. Web. Accessed November 8, 2014. <http://www.bbc.com/sport/0/athletics/29446276>,

sexual practice seeks to produce the sexually marginalized subject as a respectable citizen of the nation, one whose sexuality is a personal and private matter, and one indeed who has the means to demand and realize his/her privacy. Simultaneous with this normalizing rhetoric is the subtextual privileging of a type of sexuality that remains indoors, that affords a bedroom and that enjoys the secrecy of a closed space. In other words, it is a middle-/upper-class model of appropriate sexual behavior that is contained within the private realm and does not spill over into or disrupt the productivity and work ethic of the Indian public/national sphere. Thus, within this demand of inclusion into the intelligible and regulated national citizenry is the hidden demand to be valued as more respectable, more viable and more worthy than other modalities of being: hijras, street walkers/sex workers, and now, even gender ambiguous athletes.

Such an implicit decanting of the public sphere of sexuality, public sexual practices, and visible gender nonconformity (which itself inevitably incites an interrogation of the persons' sexuality), in the right to privacy argument, is a plea founded upon hegemonic upper-caste values of respectability that disavows those very subjects in whose name the LGBT movement gathers force. Much like the punitive outcomes of failing gender tests for certain sex-gender nonconforming bodies, the right to privacy argument casts sex workers, transsexuals and transgender people who trade in public performances of gender and of eroticism, as pollutants who have failed at their civic duties. Hijras and kinnars all over the country are not oblivious to this political and epistemic violence. In the sudden rush of media coverage of the opinions and activities of sexual deviants/gays/queers after the High Court judgment, the Hindi news channel NDTV India interviewed hijras from non-urban North India (exact location unspecified)

to get their response to the recent legal victory for sexual minorities in India. Screened on the day of the judgment itself, July 2nd 2009, NDTV ran a feature called “Is Indian society ready to accept homosexuality?” as part of its program, News Point.²⁶ The two hijras whose interviews were excerpted in the presentation strongly argued against the High Court judgment, calling homosexuality a crime, an unnatural act and something to be condemned by society. Though this perspective is certainly not representative of hijra communities around the country, it is nevertheless striking that the rhetoric used here is wholly aligned with mainstream homophobia. When asked why they did not see this judgment as something that affected them too, both speakers made clear that being a hijra was not a question of sexuality at all. It was a question of (a “third”) gender, and then of class. They explained that they felt, lived and suffered as women (“trapped in male bodies”) and sought to form heterosexual unions and marriages, in the absence of which they at least wanted the continued flourishing of their sex- work careers. The High Court judgment, by making it legal for men to have sex with men openly, will rob the hijra communities of their clientele they asserted, and then, “What will we eat?” So the question of biological and/or gender nonconformity (certainly not always the same thing) requires a comprehensive analysis on its own terms – one that must locate itself in relation to class and caste struggles, and yet resist subsumption under questions of sex/gender diversity, or sexuality as personhood and autonomy.

Presently, there is a triple marginalization of female masculinity: within mainstream heteronormative society, within Indian feminist rhetoric and further still,

²⁶ “Is Indian Society ready to accept homosexuality?” NDTV NewsPoint, July 2, 2009. Web. Last Accessed November 13, 2014. <http://www.ndtv.com/video/player/news-point/is-indian-society-ready-to-accept-homosexuality/86734>

within mainstream Indian LGBT politics. Paradoxically, often this marginal status of female-masculine formations within dominant feminist and LGBT discourse is, in fact, because they are seen as bearing the power and privilege associated with masculinity. Categories of kothis, MTF and hijras (male born gender nonconformity or transfemininity) on the other hand, are easily read as susceptible to police brutality, AIDS and sex work rehabilitation and, of course, sexism. Further, female masculinities, as opposed to a variety of male-born gender nonconforming identities, like those of kothis, panthis, hijras, double-deckers, etc., have not been taxonomized by sexuality-centered NGO initiatives. HIV/AIDS funding projects that are fueled by global corporations have engendered a deeper inquiry into male homosexuality/gender variance as well as sex work.²⁷ Ashley Tellis has noted that the categories of kothi, panthi, etc. are the effect and construction of these funded enterprises that serve to pathologize and medicalize male homosexual behavior, for the purposes of AIDS disease management, and more so for the management of public sexuality.²⁸ Malobika, a founding member of the famous Kolkata based LBT organization, Sappho, provides her own critique of the NGOization of gender/sexual difference in India,

“...I want to highlight here ... how the politics of funding has completely changed the dynamics of the queer movement. When we started off, the whole discourse was around HIV and AIDS. We consistently tried to bring in an alternative voice to this paradigm. What about the violence against lesbian and bisexual women? Why should the F to M be invisibilized, just because they are not as susceptible to HIV as gay men, transwomen and MSMs...? At the end of the day, gender becomes important here... and how it hierarchises the non normative sexualities too! I have seen some M to Fs talking

²⁷ Naz Foundation International (receives funding from HIVOS, Netherlands, Ford Foundation, USAID etc.); Humsafar Trust, Bombay (funding by USAID, Family Health Intl., HIVOS Netherlands etc.); SAATHII (Solidarity and Action Against The HIV Infection in India; funded by WHO, UNDP, UNAIDS, John M Lloyd Foundation etc.) to name a few.

²⁸ Ashley Tellis, “The Revolution Will Not Be Funded”; *Himal Southasian* (himalmag.com); March 2008

so much about exploitation suddenly taking on a masculinist tone and swearing at network meetings where projects are allotted!”

Thus, in the absence of any HIV related administrative necessity and the perception of women’s sexual expression as inherently threatening to patriarchal systems, women’s and female born masculine identified people’s gender and sexuality remains largely under-researched and underfunded.²⁹

No local categorizations of female queer expressions of masculinity have found currency or popularity among large sections of Indian society to the extent with which their male-born counterparts have. Over the years, words have been invented in order to speak of women's alternate sexualities, but this nomenclature has not adequately reflected female-born gender nonconformity. Thus, bringing female masculinity into discourse necessarily requires borrowing and appropriating Western (English language) identities for Indian/local formations. The words 'butch' and TG (transgender) have recently gained intelligibility within queer communities in metropolitan cities.³⁰ Bearing this in mind, it becomes increasingly difficult to counter the charge that lesbian/female same-sex love is a Western import. Within popular LGBT, as well as mainstream feminist discourse, the masculinity of women or female-born people is immediately subjected to a double othering, both on account of gender (masculinity in any form is looked upon as powerful and threatening) and on account of its alleged foreignness. The divide between “local”

²⁹ It is important to note here that while within the context of NGO and social movement, female sexuality and gender-queerness is under-represented, this is not the case within popular culture. Films like *Girlfriend* (2004), *Fire* (1996), etc. have concentrated on woman-identified lesbian relationships.

³⁰ The terms TG or transgender, as well as transman in India, refer mostly to people who aspire to get gender affirming surgeries or other medically assisted body modifications.

and “Western” gender/sexual expressions thus also becomes one that maps onto and separates feminine and masculine gender nonconforming bodies respectively. The use of English terms to describe one's sexuality and gender is also a clear marker of classed metropolitan geopolitics, creating a divide between people who articulate their gender as one that contains elements of both femininity and masculinity (“butch”) and others who, in the absence of access to that term, in addition to societal intolerance of “masculine traits” (signs of aggression, independence, confidence and so on) in women, are forced to articulate their masculinity in more binary and/or medicalized ways.³¹ These non-English speaking and largely non-metropolitan, lower-class, and lower-caste female masculinities, are thus more susceptible to being read as existing within a mimetic and pathological relationship with patriarchal paradigms than their upper-class English-speaking counterparts. Mainstream feminism, as well as metropolitan LGBT politics, imagines these modalities as regressive and, in a way, an undoing of the work of feminist and queer thinkers over the past couple of decades. The queer and feminist injunctions of linear progress in the shape of disidentification with gender roles and embracing gender fluidity are brought down more heavily on masculine women or transmen, while more feminine women who choose to be in relationships with masculine women are readily appropriated as the subjects of emancipation from the sexism and potential violence attributed to masculine women. Malobika from Sappho confesses her misapprehension of trans embodiment as a veteran lesbian feminist:

³¹ In no way is this observation meant to imply that transgender and FTM identifications occur out of ignorance or bad faith among non-metropolitan people. It is more to say that there is a paucity of representation and recognition of female masculinity, especially within institutional taxonomies. I later discuss how, over the last decade, transmen have proliferated a number of linguistically and regionally diverse terms to indicate transmasculinity.

[T]here are those who come to us saying that they are men but not like their male friends who objectify women. Neither can they connect with their misogynist male friends nor can they speak about themselves freely with them. These voices need to be heard. You are right in saying that the resources available for F to Ms are much less compared to resources for M to Fs. But for that we are also at fault. It took us time to understand their issues. I admit that there was a time when I thought they are women and wondered why they do not understand that. It took a lot of reading and research to understand that who am I to 'fix' their gender? Of course, now we are more than vocal about trans issues.

Apprehending Female Masculinity seeks to intervene in public discourse about the singular need for LGBT visibility and recognition, in order to move beyond narratives of compulsory marginality and repression, and articulate an intersectional analysis of identity formation. By placing female masculinity and masculine identified gender nonconformity at the center of the question of gender/sexual difference in India, this dissertation bridges the analyses of hegemonic transnationalism and the neoliberal state with the experiences of a neglected gendered subjectivity, and asks, what kinds of politics lie beyond the state? That is to say, that by pointing out institutional disarticulation and neglect of masculine women, butches and transmen, the point is not at all to argue for inclusion into those institutions or public discourses, but in fact to demonstrate that other genealogies and trajectories of identity can be imagined. As becomes apparent from Malobika's own lessons learned from trans people, female- and trans masculinity cannot be folded into readily available scripts of victims vs. perpetrators of patriarchal violence, or visible vs. invisible identities. Studying the political and affective economies of representations and self-representations of female masculinity allows us to see how globalizing models of gender/sexual identity formation may be both established *and* challenged by the aesthetic practices and self-making narratives of subjectivities that have not yet been taxonomized and instituted.

The next few paragraphs will speak to the question of globalization and its impact on the proliferation of LGBT politics more specifically. To return to Mrinalini Sinha's assertion recounted above, what might it mean to use gender, and in this case specifically female masculinity, as a lens to produce located and particular knowledge? Vice versa, how might spatial and contextual knowledge help reconstitute what we know about gender?

Framing the Global and the Local

The production, distribution and globalization of gender and sexual identities in postcolonial societies, and their interface with precolonial gender formations and same-sex love is a contentious topic within contemporary postcolonial queer studies. Gender/sexual nonconformities and political modalities have been critiqued on account of cultural imperialism and homogenization, albeit through antagonistic routes, both within conservative nationalist discourse, and within postcolonial critiques of empire. Nationalist discourse constructs LGBT identity as a "Western" import, an emblem of moral corruption and depravity within modernity, while postcolonial queer scholars critique LGBT visibility politics and multinational funding agenda for the universalization of Eurocentric taxonomies, and for uncritically furthering imperialist socio-economic interests.

In response to the claims that LGBTQ identities are an unwanted cultural relic of European colonial rule, are not representative of authentic national culture and identity, and serve only to emasculate, denigrate and corrupt the moral fiber of the postcolonial nation, some LGBT activist-scholars have attempted to recuperate gender/sexual

nonconformity in indigenous *precolonial* history.³² These projects have revisited the precolonial past in order to consolidate an archive of LGBT identity and produce a sense of historical continuity between precolonial, colonial and postcolonial gender/sexual formations. The historical revisionism and projects of recuperation have, in turn, come under emphatic criticism for narrativizing gender/sexual variance in postcolonial societies across the world into a coherent transhistorical and transnational identity category. For instance, Joseph Massad critiques LGBT rights activists and scholars in the Arab world for perpetuating the neocolonial universalization of sexual identities and “produc(ing) homosexuals...where they do not exist.”³³ His suggestion is not merely that “sexuality” mutates over different historical and geographical contexts, but that “sexuality” itself, “as an epistemological and ontological category, is a product of specific Euro-American histories and social formations, that it is a Euro-American “cultural” category that is not universal or necessarily universalizable.”³⁴ However, Massad’s critique itself serves to further reify the assumed predominance of the Global North in shaping gender/sexual variant subjectivities across the world, and treats “West” and “Non-West” as binary, static and ahistorical categories that then circumscribe all gay rights activism, global and local, as uniformly complicit in some form of imperialism. As evidenced in the web of political positions and counter-positions mentioned above, the

³² For examples of such revisionist work in India, see Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai (eds.), *Same Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History* (2001); Ruth Vanita, *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society* (2002)

³³ Joseph Massad. “Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World” in *Public Culture* Spring 2002 14:2, Durham: Duke University Press, 2002, pp. 361–386

³⁴ Félix Boggio Éwanjé-Épée and Stella Magliani-Belkacem, “The Empire of Sexuality: An Interview with Joseph Massad” in *Jadaliyya*, March 2013. Web. http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/10461/the-empire-of-sexuality_an-interview-with-joseph-m

axes of signification around which these positions cohere are the dichotomies between local and global, and normativity and resistance.

The construction of postcolonial identities through processes of colonial and postcolonial governance (such as the census, five-year developmental plans, and socio-political reform) has been a longstanding discussion within postcolonial historiography. More recently, this debate has expanded to include a consideration of economic liberalization and globalization. This dissertation is situated in the discursive middle space between governmental technologies of regulation, the commoditization of culture, and polyvalent interpretive practices, in order to produce an analysis of how they shore up particular gendered subjectivities, such as female masculinity and queer publics. It is worth stressing that the categories of local and global are often conceived as an encounter between two discrete entities, where either the global dominates or subsumes the local in its top-down, teleological sweep or, in a few cases, the local is able to resist the historical force of the global and is seen as “preserving” its authentic origins. The challenge set forth by such conceptualizations is to find alternatives that account for the mutual reconstitution of the global and the local, nonlinear temporalities that give rise to complex cultural identifications and the uneven distribution of power in the contemporary moment of globalization.

As discussed above, transnational queer scholarship has extensively theorized the globalization of sexuality and complicated the binaries of local and global, as well as center and periphery.³⁵ My dissertation relocates this analysis within postcolonial studies, as a way to interrogate some of the epistemological categories (like nation,

³⁵ See also Mohanty 1991, Alexander 2006, Grewal and Kaplan 1994, Puar 2007, etc.

modernity, development, class and caste) pertinent to discussions of sexuality in the geo-political context of India in the time of liberalization. Resisting the uptake of postcolonial critiques into a theorization of transnational subjectivities and political praxis, my dissertation de-centers the self-certain queer global subject that emerges within many conceptualizations of transnational queer and feminist praxis,³⁶ to focus instead on the ways in which gendered subjectivity in the postcolony is perpetually fissured, failed, and in negotiations with modernity. In my dissertation, female masculinity is a conceptual and material site that is instrumental to a broader understanding of postcolonial power relations and that rethinks oppositional interpretive categories such as resistance vs. passivity, hegemony vs. counter-hegemony, and indeed, colonial vs. postcolonial.³⁷

A majority of the scholarship on Indian gender and sexuality falls into three categories: sexual minorities rights legislation; identity formation and representation; and sexual health. An important and critical subset of this has been through the anthropological and historical recuperation of gender-nonconforming or “third gender” category of people (hijras, kothis, etc) into an LGBT identity paradigm. However, in the past decade or so, scholarship on sexuality has experienced a shift, as scholars such as Aniruddha Dutta (2013), Shad Naved (2012), Nivedita Menon (2008), Ashley Tellis

³⁶ For a more comprehensive critique of transnational feminist praxis, see Desai, Bouchard and Detournay. “Disavowed Legacies and Honorable Thievery: The Work of the “Transnational” in Feminist and LGBTQ Studies” in *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis* by Amanda Lock Swarr and Richa Nagar (eds). Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010.

³⁷ I follow African postcolonial theorist Achille Mbembe’s assertion in his 1992 article: “...in order to account for both the mind-set and the effectiveness of postcolonial relations of power, we need to go beyond the binary categories used in standard interpretations of domination, such as resistance v. passivity, autonomy v. subjection, state v. civil society, hegemony v. counter-hegemony, totalisation v. detotalisation. These oppositions are not helpful; rather, they cloud our understanding of postcolonial relations”. Achille Mbembe, “Provisional Notes on the Postcolony” in *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* Vol. 62, No. 1 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p.3

(2008), and Akshay Khanna (2005) have brought postcolonial, transnational, feminist and queer studies lenses to bear upon studies of gender and sexuality in India.³⁸ This dissertation contributes to this body of literature in demanding that we analyze how sexual/gender minorities are not only constructed by, but also in dominant structures, so as to better understand the political compromises involved in contemporary LGBT lives and social movements. While engaging transnationalism, globalization cannot be understood as a process that merely effects the domination of Euro-American economic policies and political institutions on passive and disadvantaged Indian LGBT communities. Although globally legible categories like LGBT mobilize politics around gender and sexual difference and result in a perceived expansion of community, they simultaneously gloss over class and caste issues within these communities.³⁹ Further, framing the peculiarities of gender identity in India as localizing, decentering and challenging universal LGBT paradigms does not account for the ways in which gender/sexual minorities themselves contribute to dominant globalizing institutions. To comprehend the complexity of relationships between transnational, national and regional scales, a more nuanced reading of globalization is necessary; one that treats the process

38 See, Aniruddha Dutta, "Globalizing through the Vernacular: Gender/sexual Transnationalism and the Making of Sexual Minorities in Eastern India" Dissertation: University of Minnesota, May 2013; Shad Naved, "The Erotic Conceit: History, Sexuality and the Urdu Ghazal", Dissertation: University of California, Los Angeles, 2012; Nivedita Menon, (ed.) *Sexualities*, New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2008; Ashley Tellis, "The Revolution Will Not be Funded", *Himal SouthAsian*, March 2008; Akshay Khanna, 'Beyond Sexuality(?)', in *Because I Have a Voice – Queer Politics in India*, Gautam Bhan and Arvind Narrain. (eds.) New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2005.

39 Dennis Altman, "Rupture or Continuity? The Internationalization of Gay Identities" in *Social Text* No. 48 (Autumn, 1996), Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 77-94.

as a set of uneven negotiations and unexpected alliances between multiple cultural sites, which are neither always passive nor always resistant.⁴⁰

Thus, at the heart of this project is the question, what can representations of female masculinity teach us about postcolonial attachments to nationalism, globalization, and struggles for citizenship? To this end, I locate my analysis of female masculinity within media representations that center gender and sexuality and produce a notion of a proper subject of political emancipation and cultural legibility. From documentary cinema to literary texts, I want to analyze media representations as effects of neoliberal claims to cultural citizenship. More than considerations of good/bad representation, it is the question of what makes that representational event a possible or viable one that is captivating. Critical scholarship in India and transnational critiques of North-South asymmetries have begun looking at the limitations of the funding-dictated agenda of NGOs working for the empowerment of sexual minorities. The biopolitical implications of NGO taxonomies have been discussed above and their influence on the LGBT social movement is discernable as well. (Self-) representations and sporadic/non-linear instantiations of identity/community within various media must also be understood within this constellation of meanings in which we critique NGOs as universalizing institutions. That is to say, media texts must be studied as moments in which the neoliberal injunction to represent oneself is materialized in all its disjointed, multiple, erratic, and often contradictory forms.

⁴⁰ J. K. Gibson-Graham, "Querying Globalization" in *Postcolonial, Queer: Theoretical Intersections*. John C. Hawley (ed), Albany: State University of New York Press. 2001.

Departing from the historical archive, this dissertation locates its sources in cultural production such as literature, film and news-media. Anjali Arondekar reminds us that even a self-conscious move away from the institutional archives does not guarantee a departure from the reading practices and epistemological impetus that “cohere around a temporally ordered seduction of access, which stretches from the evidentiary promise of the past into the narrative possibilities of future.”⁴¹ The reading practice that I deploy in my project is not one that is interested primarily in the recovery of female masculinity as an object of study heretofore lost in history and needing to ‘come out.’ Neither is my project invested in highlighting the exceptionality of female masculinity as a gender formation, in its potential for dismantling gender roles/masculinity. Rather, by combining the methodologies and reading practices employed in historical research, textual analysis, cinema and spectatorship studies, I examine what allows female masculinity to emerge, and show how media representations of masculine women are multiple and non-linear events that are embedded within uneven and contested relationships between different cultural, economic and political sites. Arondekar writes,

“Sexuality endures as an object of historical recovery, it seems, through a poetics of melancholia, an irresolvable longing for loss that refuses all forms of consolations. My meditations call upon a historiography of sexuality in South Asia that pushes against the binding energies of such melancholic historicism. In the face of the casual brutality of dispersed suffering, any epistemological privileging of loss (past or present) assumes an eventfulness that flounders in everyday subaltern life. To fix sexuality primarily within such an arbitrary arsenal of loss (while politically exigent) is to refuse alternative histories of emergence.”⁴²

⁴¹ Anjali Arondekar, “Without a Trace: Sexuality and the Colonial Archive” in *Journal of the History of Sexuality* Volume 14, Numbers 1/2, Austin: University of Texas Press January 2005/April 2005, pp. 10-27

⁴² Anjali Arondekar, Abstract for “Lyrical Summonings: Sexuality, Historiography, South Asia”, Lecture at University of Minnesota, May 7, 2014.

In other words, this dissertation is a partial answer to Arondekar's call for viewing gender/sexual nonconformity in India not through loss and scarcity, but as a "radical abundance" that is replete with an "ordinary surplus" of representations that bears the potential of reconfiguring gender in India.

A study of audio-visual texts in contemporary Indian popular culture necessitates an examination of the processes through which sexed subjects are interpellated and formed in and through performance. In her essay "Pleasurable Negotiations," Christine Gledhill proposes a theory of negotiation as a tool for analyzing the production of meaning.⁴³ Meaning making relies on the concept of hegemony, which describes how ideological power in society can never be secured once and for all, but must be continually re-established within social contestation.⁴⁴ Thus cultural productions become sites of textual negotiation, where "meanings are not fixed entities to be deployed at the will of a communicator, but products of textual interactions shaped by a range of economic, aesthetic and ideological factors that often operate unconsciously [and] are unpredictable and difficult to control."⁴⁵ As a result, the contesting meanings and pleasures of a work can produce potentially resistant or contradictory determinations based on the social and cultural constitution of the audience.⁴⁶ Rather than regarding the spectator as passive consumer, Gledhill proposes that the process of negotiation suggests

⁴³ Christine Gledhill. "Pleasurable Negotiations" in *Female Spectators*. Ed. D. Pribram London: Verso. 1988, pp 64–89.

⁴⁴ Gledhill (1988) p. 68

⁴⁵ Gledhill (1988) p.70

⁴⁶ Gledhill (1988) p.70

that “a range of positions of identification may exist within any text; and that, within the social situation of their viewing, audiences may shift subject positions as they interact with the text.”⁴⁷ Thus, there is a shift of the onus of meaning making from the producer of images to the audience of those images. The methodology here, then, is to use both textual and contextual analysis to open up a cultural production to its contradictions and determine the conditions and possibilities of alternative readings within various contexts, such as gender and sexuality.

An analytical move towards the ways in which cultural texts are apprehended and understood by audiences is exemplified in Indian postcolonial film criticism, where the focus is on how films are in fact received by various audiences and what the material, ideological and cultural reasons are to make such a reception possible. The self-conscious ideological interventions of the postcolonial nation-state (via censorship, financial regulation of the mass entertainment industry, etc.), the importance of star-spectator relationships, etc., all form a crucial part of the analysis of audience reception. Film theorists such as Madhava Prasad (1998), Ravi Vasudevan (2000), Jigna Desai (2003), and Lalitha Gopalan (2002) have emphasized the need to read and make meaning of cinematic and cultural texts in general within circuits of production and consumption, thereby centering political economy and cinephilia over purely psychoanalytic interpretations.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Gledhill (1988) p.73

⁴⁸ Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998; Ravi Vasudevan, *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000; Lalitha Gopalan, *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema*, London: British Film Institute Publishing, 2002; Jigna Desai, *Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South-Asian Diasporic Film*, New York: Routledge, 2004.

This dissertation will examine the ways in which visual culture nurtures multifarious, often oppositional and always intersecting, political investments of disparate audiences with the hope of offering a nuanced method of reading cultural productions. If media is considered a signifying institution that produces consent and consensus within dominant ideology,⁴⁹ it becomes possible to read pop culture as a representational space through which hegemonic discourses speak, but which also simultaneously threatens the very symbolic structures that sustain it. Pop-culture and ephemera should be read as open-ended cultural productions that invite and consolidate disparate spectatorial desires, which in turn successfully interrupt the dichotomous relationship between the normative and the resistant, and the dominant and the marginal, and become a staging of a contestation over meaning that escapes totalizing interpretations of identity.

Chapter One, “Feeble Hegemonies: The Masculinization of Hindu Nationalism and Narratives of Crisis in Post/colonial Northern India” traces a genealogy of Hindu upper-caste masculinity within nationalist discourses from the period of nationalist reform in colonial India (from the 1920s to the present moment). If female masculinity pertains to a gender formation that emerges from within the existing terrain of gender relations in India, then what kind of masculinity does it cite? How do certain embodiments and discursive tropes find resonance for masculine gender nonconforming people, and not others? What might be the historical force behind these contemporary

⁴⁹ Stuart Hall “The Rediscovery of 'Ideology': The Return of the Repressed in Media Studies” in *Culture, Society and the Media* ed. Gurevitch, Bennett et al, New York: Methuen, 1982.

figurations of masculinity? By placing masculinity at the center of an analysis of anti-colonial and contemporary neoliberal nation-building projects, this chapter reveals the anxieties that propel the masculinization of contemporary Hinduism and Hindu nationalism. The emergence of militant, masculinized nationalism is made possible by a recursive investment in narratives of ‘masculinity in crisis.’ In order for upper-caste Hindu masculinity to maintain hegemonic control of gender relations and political priorities in India, it routinely admonishes us to rescue it, and concomitantly ‘the nation,’ from crisis. In this chapter, I argue that it is within these narratives of crisis and within the appeal to come to its rescue it from its latest threat that Hindu masculinist nationalism de-naturalizes itself and reveals its fragile component parts. At the same time, these narrative moments of “crisis” provide an entry point for improperly masculine figures (non-males) into hegemonic masculinity, and in turn to the project of nation-building.

Chapter Two, “He calls me ‘girl’/ I call him ‘fatso’: Developing Female Masculinity as an Analytical Lens”, investigates the ways in which female masculinity might serve as an analytical lens through which to expand LGBT and feminist discourses on gender nonconformity and masculinity. This chapter demonstrates how lesbian feminists in India have largely failed to undo the gender binary or account for gender nonconformity, in its appraisal of patriarchy and masculinity. By doing close readings of two documentary films, *Who Can Speak of Men?* (2003) and *Manjuben Truckdriver* (2002) I locate alternative enunciations of the political and the counter-hegemonic in the masculine embodiments and everyday embroilments of masculine gender nonconforming people. The chapter delves into the mundane archive of the lives portrayed in these films, in order to demonstrate the variegated, unruly and surprising ways in which masculine

gender nonconforming people dwell within the hegemonic, and also eke out a politics of talking back. The chapter takes the charge of female masculinity as copy of heteropatriarchy seriously and demonstrates the complex ways in which the act of mimicking can produce radically unfaithful copies of the hegemonic, thereby undoing the very structure upon which it stands. Further, the chapter explores how an intersectional analysis of female masculinity in India can expose the singular, upper-caste and upper-class notion of masculinity that often circumscribes much feminist critical work. In the latter half of the chapter, I deploy female masculinity as a way to contribute to the contemporary debates on the efficacy of intersectionality, as a quintessentially feminist method, in accounting for the management and negotiation of difference. I end the chapter by showing how female masculinity refuses both a reification of Otherness as necessarily aggrieved or resistant, as well as establishing commensurability between gender, class, and caste. In conclusion, I meditate on the need to produce more nuanced theorizations of the caste-based nature of gender norms.

Chapter Three, “Queer Fixations: Milan Singh, Falguni Pathak, and the Imbrications of Queer and Nation,” builds on this intersectional analysis of female masculinity to make the claim that in the metropolitan LGBT community’s desire for state recognition through a politics of visibility and legibility, it disavows other ways of self-making and consolidating identity that articulate themselves through attachments to nation, tradition, and so on. In particular, in reifying the desire for the state and its constitutive embroilments with law, democratic procedures, and developmentalist investments in capital, metropolitan LGBT people cast the LGBT struggle as modern and progressive, while perceiving other kinds of political articulations that route themselves

through attachments to the nation, in particular, as pre-modern and regressive. This is significant, due to the fact that the attachments to the nation and tradition articulated *as* nation and tradition often emerge from non-elite, non-cosmopolitan queer formations that are already inscribed as pre-modern and out of step within developmentalist conceptions of citizenship. Further, in its bid for inclusion within statist models of equality, the LGBT community constructs itself as aggrieved and disenfranchised, thereby remaining uncritical of its own imbrications in structures of power and dominance. At the same time, it insists on casting an attachment to the nation as uniformly conservative, fixated upon tradition or archaic types of patriotism, and inimical to LGBT liberation. This chapter does a queer reading of two masculine gender nonconforming pop music icons, Milan Singh and Falguni Pathak, at the time of India's economic liberalization, to show that, contrary to the common understanding of nation and nationalism as prohibitive of gender/sexual nonconformity, the queer and the nation can certainly be co-constitutive. A queer reading of the performances and music videos of singer-performers Milan Singh and Falguni Pathak will also elucidate the ways in which multiple, disparate spectatorial gazes, that simultaneously eke out and disavow queer subjectivity and identification, are sustained within popular media.

In the Conclusion, I concentrate on the short story "The Complete Works of Someshwar P. Balendu." I concern myself with the way in which female masculinity may be narrativized outside of identitarian frameworks, and the implications of such narratives. I read the short story "The Complete Works..." as an undoing and confounding of the teleologies of identity, in that Someshwar's story is opaque, chaotic and resists intelligibility and categorization. In almost complete opposition to the self-

certain psychological developmentalism of LGBT narratives of coming out, Someshwar's story is saturated and almost written over by his material, cultural and geographical surroundings. I contend that the short story is a materialization of the murkiness of postcolonial, queer subjectivity and of the veritable collapse of the self-other distinction that is so central in articulations of identity. In line with my own methodological leanings, "The Complete Works..." encourages a queer writing and reading practice that does not seek to recuperate, exchange, or fill in an absent identity/self out of political or cultural oblivion. Instead, it seeks to radically destabilize identity and gender itself, and in the process, recast the political as personal, mundane and everyday.

Chapter 1

Feeble Hegemonies: The Masculinization of Hindu Nationalism and Narratives of Crisis in Post/colonial Northern India

What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity.

– Foucault, “Nietzsche, History, Genealogy”, 1977⁵⁰

Introduction

“Bharat ke mard, we’re in danger. Losing our gift, manliness...Let’s not learn how to pakao Thai food and dance salsa. Let’s instead khao Thai food and dance bhangra...This is the new kranti I want to start. It’s called Mardangiri.”

– Sanjay Dutt, *Haywards 5000 club soda advertisement*, 2008⁵¹

In 2008, Bollywood ex-superstar Sanjay Dutt declared a crisis in Indian masculinity. In an internet-based viral ad campaign for Haywards 5000 club soda (a surrogate brand for Haywards 5000 extra strong beer), Dutt announced that Indian men have become more effeminate lately, by spending too much time grooming themselves, choosing “girly” colors for their clothes (like pink and purple), spending time taking care of their babies, etc. As mentioned in the excerpt above, these newly developed traits proved that the essence of Indian masculinity is under threat of dilution by the forces of globalization and foreign cultural influence. The solution Dutt seems to propose is a self-conscious refashioning of masculinity – Mardangiri. The Hindi word for masculinity is

⁵⁰ Michel Foucault in Donald F. Bouchard (ed.), *Language, Counter-memory, Practice*, trans. D. F. Bouchard, Sherry Simon, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977, p. 142.

⁵¹ Translation: “The men of India, we’re in danger. Losing our gift, manliness...Let’s not learn how to cook Thai food and dance salsa. Let’s instead eat Thai food and dance bhangra...This is the new revolution I want to start. It’s called Mardangiri.”

“mardangi.” It refers to the naturalized attribute of male masculinity. For Dutt, however, Indian masculinity requires an active intervention, a self-aware performance signaled by the suffix “giri” that denotes the “act of being like the person/thing/characteristic described by the slang.”⁵² Thus Dutt calls for an intentional approximation to masculinity, by turning away from the domestic and sedentary towards physicality and consumption. He suggests that instead of the domestic incorporation of a foreign culture (learning how to cook Thai food), Indian masculinity resides in the commodification and whimsical consumption of foreignness (eating Thai food) and a reinvigoration of indigenous cultural practices (dancing bhangra). In calling for this new *kranti* or revolution, Dutt successfully puts masculinity in service of the Indian nation and champions a model of contemporary Indian citizenship that balances indigenous Hindu culture and globalization through a re-investment in gender roles, specifically masculinity.

Based on this reading of Dutt, this chapter examines precisely the ways in which masculinity, and gender in general, is a key site at which Indian nationhood and citizenship finds meaning and elaborates itself, and simultaneously, how ideas of nationhood and citizenship define how we embody and perform our gender. This is the context for the more particular focus of this dissertation: what might it yield to theorize *female* masculinity as an analytic category, rather than a descriptive one? That is to say, how might one put the category of female masculinity to work in order to illuminate the

⁵² Uday Mahajan, “Slang: IITB Style” *IITBombay.org*, Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay, n.d. Web. June 2012. The term Mardangiri also references and plays on the term Gandhigiri, a colloquialism invented and popularized by the film *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* (2006) of which Sanjay Dutt was the star. In the film reformed Mumbai bully and gangster Munna (played by Sanjay Dutt) plays host at a radio show in which he gives advice to callers on how to combat Dadagiri (bullying, corruption, uncivic and aggressive behavior) with Gandhgiri (tenets of Gandhism, like honesty, non-violence, and kindness).

social relations, systems and structures by which one *becomes* subject to gender, rather than using the category as a way to name a preexisting type of subject? To put it in yet another, perhaps more specific, way – how can the particular configurations of female masculinity in contemporary India be mined for queer and postcolonial critiques about universalizing discourses of nationalism, modernity and global capital?⁵³ In this chapter, I contend that in order go on to study female masculinity, one must start by disaggregating the historical force of masculinity, in as far as masculinity (and gender in general) is a relation in power. It is through this chapter’s genealogical exploration of masculinity and the nationalist discourses within which it has been consolidated over time, that I hope to base my further contention that traces of gender trouble and gender

⁵³ My use of the term ‘queer’ must be contextualized here briefly. The terrain of sexuality has been significantly reconfigured by Queer theory. I understand the term “queer” as it has been theorized by this scholarship – as a conceptual move that complicates LGBT politics of representation and visibility, by denaturalizing gender and sexuality and might well find itself at odds with both the hegemonic norm of heteropatriarchy as well as homonormativity. A comprehensive and effective critique of the heteronormative state has been forwarded by queer theorists like Michael Warner (1999), Lisa Duggan (2004) and Judith Butler (2002). Often located within debates around the legalization of gay marriage in the US, these critiques have outlined the biopolitical techniques of the state that serve to control and regulate populations via discourse and knowledge production shaped by normative beliefs and values (Foucault 1978). Not only is their critique leveled at the state but also the normalizing impulse and the desire to conform to dominant formations that is prevalent within queer movements in the West, especially in the US. Such a reading echoes and elaborates upon precisely the power-knowledge nexus embodied by the ‘modern’ state that postcolonial studies set out to critique. Further, within the US, the conception of ‘queer’ as an all-encompassing term for myriad sexualities, as well as different types of dissenting politics, has been critiqued on account of racialized sexualities by scholars like E. Patrick Johnson (2005) and Roderick Ferguson (2004). Using intersectionality as their analytical paradigm, many queer scholars of color have questioned the ways in which the term “queer” subsumes and flattens significant differences in racial experiences and standpoint while treating its own history and material context as economically neutral and racially unmarked. Similarly, mainstream academic queer theory has been charged with using universal models of subject formation in their understanding of sexuality. The need for greater attention to geographical, cultural and historical determinants has been pointed out by scholars of queer diaspora and transnationalism (Alexander 2006, Puar 2002). These scholars have furthered the critique of “queer” by considering other material and political intersections like transnational and diasporic experience, and the global South’s economic and cultural exploitation by the North . The reading of queer subjectivities within the socio-economic power grids of neoliberalism and globalization has proved itself helpful for scholars seeking to unravel queer complicities in dominant discourses and economic practices and has also made the need for an interdisciplinary approach to sexuality studies, more apparent. My use of “queer” is informed by the queer of color and the transnational and diaspora queer critiques of racial, economic and geopolitical hegemonies in an endeavor to put queer scholarship in conversation with postcolonial scholarship and subjectivities.

nonconformity do not only lie in the forgotten spaces at the margins of the nation, but in fact, emerge from within nationalist and normative projects.

Detailing the relationship between subject formation and societal norms, Judith Butler suggests that the basis of one's autonomy, as embodying particular genders or sexualities, depends fundamentally on social norms that exceed and precede our selves and that position us outside our selves in a world of different historically transforming norms.⁵⁴ The assertion of rights is not and cannot be a bid for autonomy, if autonomy is a state of individuation that exists prior to and apart from relations of dependency on norms. "This implies that [we] cannot persist without norms of *recognition* (emphasis mine) that support [our] persistence: the sense of possibility pertaining to [us] must first be imagined from somewhere else before [we] begin to imagine [ourselves]."⁵⁵ Thus, gender trouble, of female masculinity in particular, should not be thought of as the compulsory margin to a bounded and forever foreclosed, gender-normative, masculine hegemony, neither is it an inherently subversive formation. Instead, following Butler, I will detail in this chapter the ways in which hegemonic Hindu masculinity presents the very terms upon which female masculinity might become recognizable and intelligible as a kind of masculinity, thus making it necessary to conceive of the autonomy of masculine gnc as conceivable only from within the terrain of signification inhabited by that which supposedly represses it.

The ideological work of gender, or at least the construction of the figure of 'woman' in nationalist discourses, has been theorized extensively by postcolonial Indian

⁵⁴ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, New York: Routledge, 2004, p. 32

⁵⁵ Butler (2004), p.32

feminists. In their path-breaking anthology on feminist historiography, *Recasting Women* (1989), Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid have argued that the encounter between British colonial state practices and the anti-colonial Indian nationalist movement brought about a re-conception of womanhood and a “reconstitution of patriarchies” along caste-class hierarchies.⁵⁶ Focusing on femininity and womanhood, they have demonstrated how the category of the “Indian woman” became a node of symbolic and political negotiations between the British colonial government on the one hand and Indian cultural reformists and nationalist elites, on the other. As part of this nationalist reformism, the middle class – urban and rural – proliferated conceptions of “Indian” and “Hindu” womanhood, in contradistinction to ‘Western’ gender norms, but also in opposition to, and at the expense of, lower-class and lower-caste gendered practices. Not only were the actual bodies and subjectivities of the women in whose name these power struggles were taking place by and large inconsequential to the so-called reformists and progressives, often these reforms depended on the subordination of the poor and lower-caste, in order to gain political mileage. The reconstitution of patriarchal gender roles among the elite that came about in this anti-colonial nationalist period continues to bear upon the present day within contemporary frameworks of social reform and developmental politics as well. However, as history teaches us, the promise of reform, development and progressive movements within Indian modernity, are not salves for marginalized gender(s). They are, instead, an ideological mechanism that is essential to the self-definition and image of the middle class and the elite, and inscribes the specific

⁵⁶ Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, ed. *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989, p. 2.

and exclusive interests of the middle class as universal and beneficial to the entire national population.⁵⁷

The question of the ideological supremacy of the middle class in defining the parameters of gendered citizenship is especially important in contemporary India, as the gay rights movement has gained momentum in the last decade. Heralded as the new civil rights movement within Indian democracy, it is perceived as bringing reform and modern perspectives to “tradition” minded societal and juridical homophobia. However, the insight offered by Sangari and Vaid about the universalization of social categories (such as “woman,” “Indian” or even for that matter “reform”) is not adequately scrutinized in LGBT scholarship on the colonial or even the contemporary period in South Asia. And while I will address the perils of compartmentalized periodicity for understandings of gendered norms further on in this chapter, I want to comment briefly on the lack of historization of social categories such as “sexuality” within the LGBT movement here first. The relationship between sexuality and identity has seldom been regarded as ideological in this work. Contemporary theorizations of same-sex desire in India are constructed around a range of historical moments and discourses, ranging from precolonial, colonial, to the contemporary, such that they now “coexist in parallel but different domains” without informing each other in critical ways.⁵⁸ Numerous historians and literary scholars of LGBT identities in India have mined archives and historical texts for evidence of same-sex desire, in order to dispel the notion that same-sex desire is unnatural and/or a cultural fad imported from the West. Such projects that have

⁵⁷ Sangari and Vaid (1989) pp.10-12

⁵⁸ Ashley Tellis, “Ways of Becoming”, *Seminar*. #524 New Delhi, April 2003, http://www.india-seminar.com/2003/524/524_ashley_tellis.htm

attempted to recuperate a history of sexuality in India have often failed to account for the simultaneous and constitutive history of the Indian nation and the class-caste supremacy of the middle class/elite Indians whose sexuality is being historicized.

This sort of purified and decontextualized pulling together of a coherent LGBT/queer identity and community that is somehow demographically and politically separate from “mainstream” national history and ideology is evident in the introduction to Gautam Bhan and Arvind Narrain’s anthology, *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India* (2006). They declare:

Our effort is to give voice to a concept, an identity, and a politics that is only now, and slowly at that, beginning to enter the consciousness of the nation. To speak of sexuality, and of same-sex love in particular, in India today is simultaneously an act of political assertion, of celebration, of defiance and of fear...The words of this anthology are our own scripts, written for us by ourselves as we question and challenge the right of others to script our lives.⁵⁹

While the editors claim that speaking of sexuality in the public sphere, that is to say, visibility and public recognition of homosexuality, is automatically a political act in India, they delineate two separate and oppositional realms in which national identity and same-sex loving identity have flourished. For them, this anthology is the site where the labor of staging the encounter between those two separate identities and ontological positions is performed. The use of first person plural pronouns (“our own scripts,” “our lives”) seeks to interpellate a community of same-sex loving subjects, some of whom have written themselves into existence in this anthology, uncontaminated by “others” renditions of them, and thus somehow uncontaminated by the others’/dominant ideology or politics.

⁵⁹ Gautam Bhan and Arvind Narian (eds). *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India*, New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2005. p. 3.

In response to such a model of identity formation and politics that remains devoid of an analysis of its own embeddedness in domination, LGBT scholar and critic Ashley Tellis argues that the subject of contemporary LGBT politics cannot be a subject outside of the messiness of politics, but one “whose desire is formed within, caught in and also resisting the field of politics in which it finds itself.” It seems he learns directly from Sangari and Vaid who urge us to “see that the history of feminism in India (and probably elsewhere) is inseparable from a history of “anti-feminism.”⁶⁰ Sangari and Vaid, and Tellis all point to the limits of the political consciousness within which marginalized desires and gender identifications emerge. It is in the antagonisms and contradictions within the field of LGBT historiography and politics that the contentious social experience of gender becomes meaningful. In this context, a critical reading practice for queer genders, specifically for female masculinity in LGBT politics in contemporary India, should pry apart the naturalized and psychologically interiorized relationship between alternate genders/sexualities and the notion of identity. Further, it should re-center the ideological, discursive and material contexts that allow for it to become visible and legible in the public sphere. In other words, in this chapter I argue that the emergence of “Hindu” masculinity in liberalized India and the “reconstitution of patriarchies” into a range of class-caste marked hierarchies, which have been identified by metropolitan queer activists and scholars as the repressive force behind contemporary

⁶⁰ Sangari and Vaid (1989) p. 19.

homophobia and transphobia, is, instead, the very condition that inaugurates any possibility or intelligibility of gender-queer identities.⁶¹

In order to theorize gender queer identity formation in general and later, for the larger purposes of my project, female masculinity in particular, I draw from the existing body of feminist postcolonial historiography of Indian nationalism and reformism. This body of scholarship keeps gender as its central analytic, through which it examines the continuities between the British imperial social formation and postcolonial nationhood. The postcolonial feminist critique of anti-colonial nationalist discourses in India has elucidated how the gendering of nationalist discourse occurred through the simultaneous mythicization and regulation of the woman's body and sexuality.⁶² The position of the woman in the nationalist cultural imaginary was that of the bearer of Indian culture and symbol of national community. However, while providing an extremely important analysis of the relationship between Indian nationalism, tradition and gender, what is perhaps eclipsed by this scholarship is an interrogation of the discursive consolidation of *masculinity* and masculine citizenship within articulations of nationalism in the colonial as well as contemporary Indian public sphere.

Up until the 2000s, the dominant themes in the study of masculine gender, sexuality and postcolonial Indian modernity centered around Gandhian ideals of

⁶¹ In making this argument I am most indebted to Michel Foucault's famous theorization of the "repressive hypothesis" as a gradual public disclosure of a supposedly pre-existing essence that was till now repressed, even as the naming of that which reveals itself or "comes out" requires a process of discursive construction through psychoanalysis, sexology, and technologies of discipline. Along with Foucault, I contend that the categories one seeks to unveil, in this case female masculinity, are not repressed but instead embedded in the mundane and everydayness of one's participation in social life. See, Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, vol. 1: An Introduction*, tr. Robert Hurley; New York: Vintage Books, 1990, pp. 68-70.

⁶² See Partha Chatterjee and Lata Mani. "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India" in *Cultural Critique* vol. 7, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998; and Sangari and Vaid (1989).

abstinence, celibacy and self-reliance. This body of work is threaded together by the notion of a shared Hindu masculine culture fashioned in response to the Mughal empire and British colonial rule.⁶³ The perceived racial and military supremacy of the British in colonial times, and the recasting of the Mughal empire as a religious and cultural onslaught on the Hindu people of Indian nation-state in post-independence, post-partition India, is also the context within which I locate my inquiry into the hegemonic public discourse on masculinity, Hindu identity and citizenship. I will show how contemporary constructions of masculinity, a la Sanjay Dutt from the excerpt above, are positioned on the same ideological continuum with notions of Hindu-ness, Hindu supremacy and Indian nationalism. Further, my aim is to read queer gender, and in subsequent chapters, specifically, to read *female* masculinity as embedded in and animated by this hegemonic ideological context, rather than formed in some ahistorical space of compulsory marginalization.

The following sections of this chapter will trace a genealogy of the discourses around masculinity in India, and locate it within colonial and postcolonial state politics from the late nineteenth century, marked by the beginning of the Indian anti-colonial/nationalist movement, and up until post-independence public discourse. More invested in the terms and relationships within which certain conceptions of masculinity achieve hegemonic status over others, this chapter is not a strictly chronological or historical account of masculinity. It does not seek to go back in time in order to establish

⁶³ See Sudhir Kakar, *Intimate Relations: Exploring Indian Sexuality*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990; Joseph Alter, *The Wrestler's Body: Identity and Ideology in North India*, University of California Press, 1992; Bhiku Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform: An Analysis of Gandhi's Political Discourse*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1989. Also observed by Mary John and Janaki Nair in *A Question of Silence: The Sexual Economies of Modern India*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998, p. 15.

the pious origins of Indian nationalism or Hindu masculinity, nor to establish the continuity of a uniform fully-formed conception of “hegemonic masculinity” through historical time. The task I have taken up is not informed by a sense of duty to demonstrate the persistence of the past into the present, and to establish a heritage of masculinity, though I do partially fulfill that duty. Instead, the following pages are a perspectival account of the non-linear, discontinuous, sometimes accidental and contradictory emergence of Hindu masculinity. They elucidate the changing meanings of masculinity and stage a conversation between the multiple and contrasting ways in which masculinity has been framed within scholarship on colonialism and gender in India. I rely on Foucault’s differentiation between a quest for origins and a study of the *emergence* of categories in order to highlight that this chapter is an account of force relations or a struggle between forces of domination.⁶⁴ Foucault goes on to clarify that “...no one is responsible for an emergence; no one can glory in it, since it always occurs in the interstice.”⁶⁵ His use of “interstice” is pertinent as it suggests that the relationship between different forces of power is conditioned by the spatial and temporal contexts that define them. A genealogy of the emergence of particular relationships between the colonial state, Indian nationalism, modernity and (Hindu) masculinity then allows me to explain the shifting process of subject formation in colonial and postcolonial India, in order to, later in the dissertation, discuss how female masculinity might become intelligible.

⁶⁴ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”, in Bouchard, Donald F. (ed.), *Language, Counter-memory, Practice*, trans. D. F. Bouchard, Sherry Simon. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977, pp. 139-64.

⁶⁵ Foucault in Bouchard (1977)

The emergence of the category of masculinity or “hegemonic masculinity” here also draws upon the cultural analysis of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony offered by Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature* (1977).⁶⁶ In what Williams calls an “epochal” analysis of cultural hegemony, he emphasizes the importance of understanding hegemony as the complex interrelations and movements toward dominance within the whole cultural process, and not just the cultural system that is currently and effectively dominant. Not only will such an analysis reveal the “stages and variations” that a dominant system undergoes, but also the dynamic relations between the dominant and what he calls the “residual” and the “emergent” forms of “alternative and oppositional culture.” While the residual refers to cultural forms formed in the past that are an active and effective element of the present, *emergent* cultural forms are those new relationships, practices, and meanings and values that are “*continually being created*” (emphasis mine).⁶⁷ Williams argues that as long as the new class, which is the source of the emergent cultural practice, is subordinate to the dominant class, the process of remaking social values and practices is uneven and always incomplete. Further, in as far as these emergent values/practice are seen as oppositional, there is also an attempt to incorporate them into dominant culture in ways that may look like “recognition, acknowledgement, and thus a form of *acceptance*” (emphasis in original).⁶⁸ Part of the aim of this chapter is precisely to outline the ways in which a newly emergent Bengali middle class became the source of social values and cultural practices alternative and oppositional to the dominant British constructions of masculinity. However, I also want

⁶⁶ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 121-128.

⁶⁷ Williams (1977) p. 123

⁶⁸ Williams (1977) p. 125

to suggest that one of the more insidious ways in which colonial and postcolonial Hindu masculinity achieves hegemony is through claims to perpetual subordination, or at least a crisis in domination. With special regard to postcolonial masculinity, often it is the self-fashioned incompleteness and self-identification as an emergent cultural form needing constant attention in the face of erasure under some other presumed dominant force that becomes the way to acquire social consent.

The late nineteenth century and early twentieth century period marked the rise of a gendered class consciousness among educated elite Hindu Bengalis, first due to the proliferation of civilizational, racial and gendered preconceptions about the native population in colonial discourse and policy, and then due to the internalization of those constructions by Bengalis themselves, that subsequently became the *raison d'être* of reform movements and nationalist sentiments. The recalibration of Hindu masculinity during this period was no doubt an articulation of opposition and resistance to the dominance of British masculinity, conceived under the mocking gaze of the colonizers and perceived as forever failing to fully emulate or embody dominance. While the project of Hindu masculinity was attributed with perpetual incompleteness in the colonial era, this perceived failure to fully regain domination from colonizing forces like the Mughal and the British empires, globalization and ideological formations such as secular democracy, feminism, dalit consciousness, etc., persist in contemporary discourse. Indeed Sanjay Dutt's use of the tropes of crisis in contemporary masculinity and his appeal to Hindu men to bring about a masculine "kranti" or revolution is only one of the more obvious rhetorical deployments of this constructed legacy of an endangered Hindu masculinity for the purpose of hegemony. The routinized rehearsing

of this narrative within political rhetoric since colonial times has installed the idea of the need for rehabilitation and restoration of Hindu masculinity (and by extension the Hindu masculine citizen-subject) within quotidian public consciousness. Subsequent pages in this dissertation will also examine the role and effect of this rhetorical disavowal of masculine power in shaping the politics and forms of embodiment of female masculinity and vice versa.

Colonial Masculinity and the Charge of Effeminacy

Frantz Fanon has observed that in response to the devaluation, feminization and infantilization of ‘native’ masculinity within colonial discourse, anti-colonial struggles were looked upon as a way to vindicate, above all, the subjugated masculinity of the colonized male.⁶⁹ Further, the transfer of power from colonizer to the ex-colonized at the moment of decolonization is also coded, in Fanon’s work, as an exchange between men. While both Edward Said and Fanon have helped reveal the discursive nexus between colonial power and racialized sexuality, they have also come under criticism for constructing the colonizing desire as a heterosexual masculine desire for the feminine, irrational and monstrous Orient, thereby obscuring how homoerotic desire might also propel politics of colonization and racism. Hema Chari argues that the European male desire for the subordination of Oriental kings, was a powerful fantasy that structured the

⁶⁹ Frantz Fanon has pointed out how the masculinity of “the black man” gets repeatedly eclipsed by the masculinity of the colonizer. He says, “What does man want? What does the black man want? Running the risk of angering my black brothers, I will say that a Black is not a man.” (Frantz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*. 1952. New York: Grove Press, 2008, xii) The position of the black man, Fanon notes, is one of “non-being.”

colonial enterprise, albeit often in the form of contradictory avowals and disavowals of male-male desire.⁷⁰

Even more persuasive and pertinent to articulations and negotiations around *gender* in the anti-colonial and Hindu nationalist framework, are the works of Ashis Nandy⁷¹ and Revathi Krishnaswamy,⁷² who note that “*effeminacy* (emphasis added) represents a critical and contentious idiom through which the racial and sexual ideologies of empire are mediated.”⁷³ Nandy notes that colonialism produced a shift in the Indian consciousness from the polarity between *purusatva* (masculinity) and *naritva* (femininity) towards an opposition between *purusatva* and *klibatva* (hermaphroditism, but also impotence and unmanliness). Nandy claims that femininity-in-masculinity was perceived to be a pathology that caused the ultimate negation of a man’s identity. It was more dangerous than femininity itself.⁷⁴ In comparison with the robust Judeo-Christian monotheism, Hinduism as a religious and social belief system itself was perceived as effeminate due to its unorganized, polytheistic nature, which was read as improper, erotic, irrational and thus, feminine.

Effeminacy did not always carry a negative valence in precolonial India, as shown by Krishnaswamy. She contends that in addition to the ascetic masculinity of the Brahmins and the aggressive masculinity of the Kshatriyas, there was also a third, more

⁷⁰ Hema Chari. “Colonial Fantasies and Postcolonial Identities: Elaboration of Postcolonial Masculinity and Homoerotic Desire” in *Postcolonial, Queer: Theoretical Intersections*. Ed. John Hawley, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001, p. 278

⁷¹ Ashis Nandy. *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989.

⁷² Revathi Krishnaswamy. *Effeminism: The Economy of Colonial Desire*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998.

⁷³ Krishnaswamy (1998), p. 19.

⁷⁴ Nandy (1989), p. 8.

androgynous model. Androgyny was understood more as a “symbolic transcendence” of gender division than as a lived experience of a third gender or of bisexuality. However, this symbolic transcendence, mostly popular in folk traditions, was constructed as an ideal for men, not for women. That is to say, that in Hindu mythology it is the male deities that incorporate femininity, while still retaining their masculine essence, while female deities seem to abandon femininity in greater degrees.

Nevertheless, under colonial rule (male) androgyny was read and disparaged as effeminacy. In response to this perceived inadequacy and insult, ‘reformers’ of Hinduism and anti-colonial nationalists like Vivekananda and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee fashioned themselves and the religion “in the image of a muscular, monotheistic, heterosexual, masculine Protestantism.”⁷⁵ In this pre-Gandhian reformist era, Nandy and Krishnaswamy believe Hindu reform and protest movements ended up reifying the very same colonial modalities of masculinity that they set out to resist, due to the fact that the constitutive discursive paradigm of colonial masculinity, virility and dominance were upheld in these reformist formulations, partly as a response to the popular colonial construction of masculine valor as necessary for self-rule and civilizational progress, and partly due to the pre-existing valorization of masculinity present in Hindu thought. Vivekananda’s call to reinstate and reclaim the ideals of virility and warrior masculinity not only served to harden gender roles but also caste distinctions, as he attributed “contemporary Hindu weakness or emasculation to loss of

⁷⁵Krishnaswamy (1998) p.44

textual Brahmanism and social Kshatriyahood – loss that had robbed Hindus of those original Aryan qualities they share with Westerners...”⁷⁶

Nandy heralds Gandhi’s strategic reformulation of androgyny as marking the real break in colonial discourse and the Christianization of Hinduism in the reform work of Vivekananda and Dayananda Swami.⁷⁷ Gandhian androgyny did not involve a fusion of male and female, nor was it an asexual transcendence of gender division. For Gandhi, it was the masculine that selectively took on certain aspects and cultural constructions of femininity, mainly in the service of anti-colonial struggles. Nandy goes on to claim that such a formulation of feminized masculinity radically altered conceptions of womanhood and conventional gender roles. Krishnaswamy argues against this belief, to say that “In Gandhian nationalism, as in various forms of anticolonial Hindu militancy and subaltern insurgency, femininity, particularly maternity, serves as an important discursive site for the mobilization of male interests and aspirations.”⁷⁸ Where traditional Hindu iconography sustained the dialectical tension between the virulent and sexual femininity of Kali and the domesticated, more maternal femininity of Durga, Gandhi’s feminine ideal upheld only domesticity, with an emphasis on qualities like patience, suffering and sacrifice, hence implicitly upholding heteropatriarchal conventions of feminine subservience to heterosexual male interests.

Mrinalini Sinha’s in-depth historicization of masculinity methodologically diverges from Nandy, and yields a more complex analysis of the consolidation of Hindu masculinity during colonization. Rather than accounting for the remains of the encounter

⁷⁶ Krishnaswamy (1998) p.44

⁷⁷ Nandy (1989) p.26

⁷⁸ Krishnaswamy (1998) p.46

between discrete categories of ‘western’ and ‘traditional’ Indian masculinity, Sinha elucidates how these categories themselves were constructed by and implicated in a larger imperial politics. As a self-conscious departure from Nandy’s “historical generalizations,” Sinha asserts that in order to produce a historical materialist understanding of metropolitan British masculinity and colonial Indian masculinity, it is important to broaden the analytical frame beyond the ‘nation’ and look at how these categories mutually constitute one another within the broader imperial social formation.⁷⁹ The colonial discursive binary of the ‘manly Englishman’ and the ‘effeminate Bengali babu’ that pervades justifications of the colonial civilizing mission, as well as within anti-colonial reformist nationalism, was not just a manifestation of ancient prejudices. It was a product of the perpetual re-articulation and reconfiguration of race relations in response to changes in material conditions, both in metropolitan Britain and in colonial India.

The central figure in Sinha’s analysis of colonial masculinity is that of the effeminate Bengali babu. Tanika Sarkar has shown that in colonial Bengal, manhood was closely tied to ownership of property and the Hindu zamindar (landlord) class. However, with the decline of the zamindar class in the late nineteenth century, Bengali elites were increasingly identified in terms of administrative and clerical work. The demotion from landed gentry to petty clerical staff, according to Sarkar, led to the self-perception of effeminacy in the Bengali elites. Sarkar points out that as the literature of that era suggests, the emaciation and degeneration of the Bengali middle class was

⁷⁹ Mrinalini Sinha. *Colonial Masculinity: The ‘manly Englishman’ and the ‘effeminate Bengali’ in the late nineteenth century*. Kali for Women: New Delhi, 1997.

projected specifically on to the body of the Bengali middle class male babu, who is repeatedly shown as sick(ly) and attended to by the women in the house.⁸⁰

The construct of the “effeminate Bengali babu” was also a product of the changing modes of racialization of the natives by the British colonial regime, which in turn were a response to political and economic shifts, as shown by Mrinalini Sinha. Sinha cites multiple historical sources and writings by imperialists such as James Mill, that uphold long-held racial stereotypes about the “feebleness” and soft nature of the Bengali, especially when compared to the “manlier” European races. This feebleness and perceived passivity of the Bengali male was also deployed as a justification of the defeat and colonization of Bengal to the British. Sinha quotes Lord Thomas B. Macaulay, the Law Member for India in 1830s, on the physical and moral deprivation of Bengalis:

The physical organization of the Bengalee is feeble even to effeminacy. He lives in a constant vapour bath. His pursuits are sedentary, his limbs delicate, his movements languid. During many ages he has been trampled upon by men of bolder and more hardy breeds. Courage, independence, veracity are qualities to which his constitution and his situation are equally unfavourable.⁸¹

The racial polarization between the colonizers and the colonized was thus clearly reliant on the gender ideology within British metropolitan culture and the intersection of the two was extremely instrumental within imperial policy. This is best illustrated in the instance of the Ilbert Bill controversy of 1883-84. The Ilbert Bill introduced in 1883, sought to amend the Code of Criminal Procedure of the Indian Penal Code. It proposed that various classes of native officials in the colonial administration be given partial criminal jurisdiction over European British subjects living in the mofussil, or country

⁸⁰ Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism*. Permanent Black : Delhi, 2003. pp. 33-34.

⁸¹ quoted in Sarkar (2003) p. 35

towns, in India. The Bill was understood to be a significant hurdle to the exclusiveness of European control of labor and raw materials in rural India. In response to the opposition, the Bill was modified along the concerns of European officials and non-officials, by allowing for native magistrates to have criminal jurisdiction over British subjects in the mofussils but maintaining the special legal status of British subjects. British subjects were accorded the right to request trial by a jury, at least half of which comprised European British subjects or Americans.⁸² No doubt, the preservation of this right substantially curtailed native juridical power.

Of note here is that the Ilbert Bill acted as a crucial site for the consolidation of European British public opinion – one which blatantly legitimized the racial superiority of Europeans, and which achieved this as a result of, and through the politics of, colonial masculinity. The European backlash to the Ilbert Bill justified racial hierarchies through an almost inverse relationship to naturalized gender hierarchies. That is to say that the exclusion of native men from politics and positions of power was explained in terms that were similar to those of the exclusion of British women from politics in Britain. However, while British women's femininity (the characteristic that disqualified from politics) was also considered a trait that was natural and becoming of them as women, the effeminacy of the native babu's physique and character was considered unnatural and abominable, and immediately unworthy of the right to rule.⁸³ In this way, while the actual number of native magistrates in the mofussils was pitifully small, and thus the

⁸² Sarkar (2003) p. 35

⁸³ Sinha (1997) p. 38

Bill's effects were very limited from the start, it became important for the mobilization of British race and gender ideology.

On another level, the politics of colonial masculinity also reconstituted and consolidated European racial and masculine superiority as the benevolent protectors of native (and white) women. In fact, effeminacy was attributed to the native babu in direct proportion to the supposed ill-treatment and subordination of native women. The benefits of the Ilbert Bill were not to be extended to Indian men because of their treatment of women, which proved their un-fitness for public office. British colonial officials and the State itself were instead identified as the masculine protector and uplifter of native women's lot. To be sure, scholars have pointed out since that the colonial government was at best whimsical in its concern for the emancipation of native women, often erring on the side of reform for the sake of political expediency. Indeed, similar to its role in the context of codifying caste hierarchies, the colonial State served also to reinforce and legitimize indigenous patriarchal practices. Colonial discourse and policies on the subject of women were not concerned as much with the welfare of native women as with validating the civilizing mission of the colonial State.⁸⁴ Native women were essentially the terrain on which the ideological power struggle between the masculinist colonial State and the native male elites was performed.

The strategic and wavering position of the colonial State as well as native male elites regarding the women's question is evident in the public discussion around the Age of Consent Bill of 1891. This Bill proposed to raise the age of consent for sexual

⁸⁴ Chatterjee and Mani (1998) pp.147-65.

intercourse for native girls, married and unmarried, from ten to twelve. The Bill saw sex with girls below the age of twelve as rape and punishable by ten years of imprisonment or transportation for life. While it was careful not to propose changes to the Hindu upper-caste institution of child-marriage in India, it took it upon itself to address the premature consummation of child-marriages. Even though the then Viceroy of India, Lord Landsdowne signed the Consent Act in 1891, it was met with overwhelming opposition from orthodox Hindu elites all over India, especially in Bengal.⁸⁵ Similar to the impact of the Ilbert Bill on consolidating European British sentiments about the racial divide between themselves and the native population, the Consent Act served to invigorate native opposition to the colonial State's interference in the personal affairs of the native Indian population, and started a new phase in elite nationalism in late-nineteenth century India.

Once again, the colonial politics of masculinity and the effeminization of the middle class/upper-caste educated male elites is the framework within which the opposition to the Consent Act is best understood. Functioning within this logic of colonial masculinity, as detailed above, orthodox Hindu male opponents of the Consent Act repeatedly articulated their opposition in terms of an impingement on the natural right of husbands to sexually avail of their (child) wives. De-centering the issue of rape and sexual consent of the female child, opponents of the Act appealed to the European British distaste for the unmanliness of native men and harangued them about further

⁸⁵ Sinha (1997) p.138.

emasculating native men in passing the Consent Act.⁸⁶ In so deploying this strategic logic of colonial masculinity, Orthodox Hindus not only helped entrench the stereotype of their own effeminacy, they also aligned Hindu patriarchal values with those of the British. That is to say, that even though the Consent Act is seen as an important historical moment in (Hindu) nationalist movement building, it recuperated the politics of colonial masculinity in ways that converged with imperial interests and discourse.

Even as the stereotype of the “effeminate Bengali babu” became more and more widespread, it came to refer to a very specific part of the population. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the charge of effeminacy was increasingly applied to Western educated Bengalis, and by extension, all Western educated Indians. The majority of the Bengalis, that is, the working classes, lower castes and Muslims (a majority of whom belonged to the labor class in Bengal) were not accused of this effeminacy. However, as Tanika Sarkar explains and also as shown above, the middle class of Western-educated Bengalis in fact used its perceived effeminacy to articulate its hegemonic aspirations, not by claiming to possess political or economic power, but by declaring itself to be the site of all of Bengali, and more generally, Indian society’s ills and discontent.⁸⁷ The Indian National Congress, one of the earliest national-level nationalist organizations that brought together multiple political affiliations, was often thought of as the quintessential babu organization. Thus, the attribution of effeminacy to Western-educated middle class Indian babus was a response to the political challenge posed by the Indian middle class

⁸⁶ Could the Englishman himself, with all his abhorrence of early marriages, tolerate a penal enactment, which made the husband’s sexual intercourse with his wife of 15 years of age (for, as has already been said, 12 in India would correspond to about 15 in England) punishable with transportation for life or imprisonment for 10 years?” *An Appeal to England to Save India From the Wrong and the Shame of the ‘Age of Consent Act’* (published by Bali Sadharani Sabha, 1891) p. vi, quoted in Sinha (1997) p. 140:

⁸⁷ Sarkar (2003) p. 33

to British colonial power and certain exclusive rights and privileges that the colonizers possessed in India. In Sinha's words, by the late nineteenth century, the concept of the effeminate babu came to denote the "shift in British colonial attitudes towards Western-educated Indians, from mediators between the colonial administration and the rest of the Indian population to an unrepresentative and artificial minority representing nothing but the anomalies of their situation..."⁸⁸ In other words, the colonial gendering of the politicized, Western educated middle class as effeminate in fact became the condition for the ideological supremacy of the middle class within the Hindu reformist and the Indian nationalist movement, argues Sinha. As noted by postcolonial historians since, Hindu reformists and Indian nationalists active in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were, by and large, preoccupied with the establishment of the dignity and legitimacy of upper-caste, middle class Hindu political will (often at the cost of the peasantry, the lower castes and Muslims).

In the following section, I will explore the ascendancy of the (Hindu) educated elite within the Hindu revivalist, nationalist movement, and how the nationalists' vision of modernity came to be encoded within the techniques of disciplining the male body. It is here that we see how the project of the modernization of Hinduism and the Hindu nation itself became inextricable from and articulated through the project of masculinity.

Hindu Revivalism, Physical Culture, and a Contentious Modernity

The emergence of bourgeois Indian nationalism and the beginnings of its hegemony in the latter half of the nineteenth century came to cohere in the formalization

⁸⁸ Sinha (1997) p.17

and deployment of the native tropes of self-subjection and self-discipline in order to gain consent and liberation from collective subjection. Unlike the pre-colonial, comparatively non-interventionist Mughal state, the colonial state effected the governmentalization of the indigenous population. Through the itemization and tabulation of the population in surveys and censuses, the colonial government proliferated and sharpened identitarian categories, such as caste and religion.⁸⁹ The colonial rationality that drove this taxonomization of the indigenous population materialized the body of the citizen-subject as a site of subjection (through its conversion into a unit of knowledge). The Hindu nationalist reinvigoration of the indigenous trope of self as a disciplined body in service of the collective body of the nation, was a way to convert the body from a codified site of subjugation under colonial rule, into a potential site for agency and action. In fact, the late-nineteenth century nationalist discourse sought to yoke together the notion of the nation as a realizable collectivity with that of the body-as-self at work for the nation. It used prescriptions, rectifications and revisions of discrete nationalist practices from different parts of the colonial state into a more consistent and coherent affect and dream of “Indianness,” which was to be achieved through the recuperating, disciplining and valorization of the male nationalist’s body laboring for the nation.⁹⁰ To be sure, the relationship that late nineteenth century nationalists crafted between the individual male body and the collective social body was governmentalized as well as identitarian, in that the nationalists reinscribed the universal bourgeois citizen-subject as one that was Hindu and male.

⁸⁹ Sudipta Kaviraj, “On State, Society and Discourse in India,” *IDS Bulletin*, 21, Sussex, UK: Institute of Development Studies, Web, 1990, pp. 10–15.

⁹⁰ Milind Wakankar, “Body, Crowd, Identity: Genealogy of a Hindu Nationalist Ascetics” in *Social Text*, No. 45 9 Winter 1995), Durham: Duke University Press, 1995, pp. 45-73

It is here that the nexus between discourses of feeble Bengali/Hindu masculinity and feebleness of middle class hegemony is established. To be more precise, the discourse of the feebleness of middle-class educated Hindu masculinity – colonial constructions of its inadequacy, effeminacy and unfitness to self-rule – became a tool in the hands of nationalist reformers to narrate the Hindu nation as feeble, weak, and subservient against the might of British invaders. It is clear, however, that what was weak and insubstantial was the hegemony of a consolidated middle class – a middle class that saw itself as the inheritors of the nation-state and its governance. This chapter bears the title “feeble hegemonies” precisely to make visible this narrative construction of middle-class Hindu hegemony as always feeble. In addition to pointing to the constructedness of this crisis-ridden and feeble hegemony, I also want to draw attention to the ways in which this narrative was put in service of a retroactive construction of a glorious, unified nation of the past, which must be mourned. Feeble, in as far as it derives from the Latin *flēbilis* – tearful, mournful, lamentable – also here refers to a Hindu nation and Hindu hegemony that is experienced as loss.

Indeed, this was the historical moment that saw the inception of the search for grandiose origins of the nation as a way to legitimize and demonstrate difference from colonial rule, as well as from the perceived pre-colonial subjugation under the Mughal empire.⁹¹ An exploration of this moment reveals the formulation of what Milind Wakankar calls the “late-nineteenth-century North Indian ascetics, a code of self-cultivation of *anushilan*, a set of guidelines for a relation to the self that sought to take into account the needs of both “rationality” and “spirituality,” redirecting the bourgeois

⁹¹ Wakankar (1995) p. 47.

nationalist male subject toward action against the colonizing other.”⁹² By the same token, these very ascetics would also construct the nationalist male subject as a “Hindu” male subject reclaiming his dignity and national territory from the Muslim male other.

Recalling the above discussion about the Orientalist stereotype of native Indian male effeminacy written into public discourse and solidified within colonial policies, the reason for the nationalist relocation of reform and revision of Hindu culture in the *male body* is quite evident. One of the earliest and most visible rectification projects of native masculinity began among the late-nineteenth century Bengali educated elite, through the development of a “culture of physical education.” Specifically, the turn towards physical culture started in the 1860s with the split in the Brahmo Samaj, the monotheistic religious movement which had been spearheading social and cultural reform in the region for three decades. It was members of the traditional minded faction that were the harbingers of a self-conscious movement for physical culture.⁹³ By this time, the elite were well aware of the British stereotypes of them as frail, cowardly and effete, and had internalized them, convinced of their own (bodily) effeminacy. By the 1860s, nationalist leaders both inside and outside the Brahmo Samaj had made these stereotypes their own. They described themselves and other Bengalis as “lilliputian in size and weak in constitution;” “physically about the weakest people in India;” “broken in health;” etc. Swami Vivekanand said about himself: “Alas! This frame is poor, moreover, the

⁹² Wakankar (1995) p. 47

⁹³ John Rosselli, “The Self-Image of Effeteness: Physical Education and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Bengal, *Past & Present*, No. 86 Oxford: Oxford University Press, Feb 1980, pp. 121-148. I owe this citation to Sinha as well as Wakankar.

physique of a Bengali...”⁹⁴ The explanation for these traits ranged from the environment, the fertility of the soil which made physical toil unnecessary, an innutritious rice-centered diet, alcohol, early marriage, and more importantly an over-emphasis on studying and books.⁹⁵ Bankim Chandra was more reluctant to espouse these environmental causes and chalked Bengali effeteness to genetics. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, he believed that the Bengali lack of physical/military valor was to be blamed on their non-Aryan descent. However, the most important discourse that proliferated in this period about Bengali unmanliness, was a narrative of historical degeneration and physical downfall. This narrative was favored by nationalists as the explanation for physical shortcomings, precisely because it created an opportunity for something to be done to overcome the contemporary state of affairs.

The explanation put forth by nineteenth-century nationalists was that while earlier there were a range of different types of akharas (simple gymnasias) in which the landed gentry and other educated men exercised by participating in various sports like wrestling, fencing with lathis (thick bamboo sticks), now, due to the material security guaranteed by British rule and an emphasis instead on English education, physical culture was severely neglected.⁹⁶ In 1866, Rajnarayan Basu’s prospectus for the Nationality Promotion Society placed the revival of “the national gymnastic exercises” at number one on the list of the Society’s goals. The following year saw the inauguration, by the Tagore family of the Brahmo Samaj, of the Hindu Mela (fair), an

⁹⁴ Anon., ““Dialogue” of the “Chit-Chat Club””, *Bengal Mag.*, I no. 4 (Nov. 1872); *National Paper*, 2 Sept. 1868 and May 1869; Vivekananda to Sarala Ghoshal [Sarala Debi], 24 Apr. 1897, in *Letters of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta, 1964), pp. 393; quoted in Roselli (1980) p. 123.

⁹⁵ Roselli, (1980) p. 124.

⁹⁶ Roselli (1980) p. 125.

annual festival in Calcutta showcasing artistic, cultural and sporting events. In 1868, Nabagopal Mitra founded a school for gymnastics and trained many physical education instructors who would go on to teach in newly sprouting akharas. The National Paper, part of the Hindu Mela organization, championed a campaign in the late 1860s for Bengalis to serve in the army, as a way to overcome and rectify their self-admitted effeteness: “If we wish to be one with Rajputs, Sikhs and Marathas...we must train ourselves as soldiers...”⁹⁷ It is evident here that the concept of the nation is an ambiguous one yet, where it is not fully clear if it seeks to bring together all Bengalis or “India” or a united Hindu community. A speaker at the first Mela declared that the aim was to fuse “distinct Hindu nationalities into one common Hindu nationality.”⁹⁸ As John Rosselli contends, the term “nationality” in these early imaginings seems to mean *jati*, a word often used for “community” as well as “caste.” It did not seem to encompass Muslims, who were ignored or disliked. The idea of Hindus forming a nation by themselves reveals that “nation” was not a territorial entity yet, it was an abstract idea that was aspired to.⁹⁹ Certainly the anxiety among the first educated bourgeois nationalists in Bengal to rectify their effeteness and overthrow the colonial stereotype of the unmanly native was as much due to anti-colonial sentiment as to a desire to raise themselves to the same level of masculine military valor as other Hindu castes and communities across the British empire.

While the Hindu Mela suffered dilution during the next decade or so, the nationalist emphasis on physical culture took on a more urgent note as the social and

⁹⁷*National Paper*, 8 May 1867, quoted in Rosselli (1980) p. 128

⁹⁸*National Paper*, 17 April 1867, quoted in Rosselli (1980) p. 129

⁹⁹ Rosselli, (1980) p. 129

religious reform movement gained more ground, and the anti-colonial clashes increased over the Ilbert Bill (1883). As discussed above, the bill made British racism more blatant than ever before, and served to consolidate Bengali nationalist dissent as well as widen the base of the anti-colonial agitation with the setting up of the Indian National Congress in 1885. This expansion is evident in Sarala Debi's (a niece of Rabindranath Tagore's) efforts to learn from leaders from western India, such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak, in her attempt to rouse young men in Bengal toward militant nationalist physical culture. Sarala Debi started a number of festivals in which she combined displays of physical strength and athleticism, and the worship of ancient heroes with the celebrations of the religious festival of Durga Puja.

This nexus between the geographically expanding nationalist socio-cultural movement, masculine physical culture and Hindu revivalism becomes even more evident in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's conceptualization of anushilan.¹⁰⁰ Locating the core of this concept in the bourgeois, Hindu, male body, Wakankar contends that the body was to "serve as a link between culture and power, between an ascetics and a politics, and between what was after all an elitist-Hindu program for national-cultural regeneration and the dispersed Hindu national-popular itself."¹⁰¹ Bankim repurposed the ethical codes of "devotion," "knowledge" and "duty" laid out in the Gita and revalued them over the notions of renunciation and otherworldliness that coexisted in the text. Anushilan meant the perfecting of "innate human faculties," physical and mental, with harmony and moderation. Either extreme, that of the excessively abstinent like the ascetic, or the

¹⁰⁰ Roselli (1980) translated anushilan as "the fullest development of all faculties, physical and mental." p.130

¹⁰¹ Wakankar,(1995) pp. 49-51

overly indulgent like the glutton, or plundering like the colonizing European, were all looked down upon. Instead one was to model oneself on the mythic God and hero, Krishna, the epitome of perfection – “a householder, diplomat, warrior, law-giver, saint and preacher.”¹⁰²

Every practitioner of anushilan was to cultivate devotion to his own reformed self, to his country and to God. In order to love oneself and one’s country, however, one also needed to do “self-protection, right self-defense and just war,” as a way to turn the theoretical ideas and ascetics of anushilan into action for the nation. Bankim argued that anushilan requires the male nationalist to aspire to imitate Godliness or at least those ideal men who have displayed qualities that resemble God, or who are believed to be God incarnate. Thus anushilan was an ideal *embodied* in ideal men or “adarsh purush.” A crucial component of anushilan was the cultivation of the right balance between force and mercy, and a relationship with one’s subordinates and those that one protected that inspired not fear, but respect in them. This idea is crucial to the development of a later Hindu ethic of “tolerance” towards those that must “submit” to “us,” especially Muslims.¹⁰³ As Ranajit Guha and Wakankar have both demonstrated, this self-conscious “Hindu” notion of perfectibility was the Indian nationalist revamping of European colonial humanism. The revival and re-appropriation of Hindu scriptures and religious texts in this nationalist period were thought to be in keeping with the requirement of “rational,” modern and verifiable examination of what was otherwise considered

¹⁰² Wakankar,(1995) pp. 49-51

¹⁰³ Wakankar,(1995) p. 50

supernatural, miraculous and wholly improbable by Orientalists.¹⁰⁴ Thus the Hindu revivalist project has from its very roots been an articulation of and participation in (identitarian and anti-colonial) modernity, in terms of its earliest and most influential proponents. Bankim's idea of anushilan found many followers among bourgeois nationalist Hindu youth. The Anushilan Samiti (or society) founded in Bengal in 1901 was the first of many such samitis that sprang up all over Bengal and soon became the center of militant/terrorist groups that favored a violent resistance to colonial rule, over other means.¹⁰⁵

One well known and influential young man that the Anushilan Samiti developed ties with was Vinayak Damodar Savarkar. Savarkar was born in Maharashtra and at a young age set up a secret revolutionary society called the Abhinava Bharat Society (Young India Society) with the purpose of reviving Hindu pride and overcoming colonial rule. Savarkar resisted the vision of the effeminate native, and claimed that the martial valor of the Hindus had degenerated for a brief historical moment, which the British were able to take advantage of. He believed that Hinduism was once a powerful and masculine religious system, one that reached its maturity during the rule of the Marathas, under Shivaji. In his writings, Savarkar was clear that the dream of "Hindu Swaraj" (Hindu self-rule/nation) is what should animate the Hindu warrior male's patriotism. And while Savarkar is willing to concede the superiority of the military

¹⁰⁴ Wakankar, (1995) p. 50.

¹⁰⁵ The Anushilan Samitis in Bengal, and the later proliferation of Shivaji Clubs in Maharashtra, served as prototypes for the organizations structured and set up by the main Hindu nationalist organization of contemporary times, the RSS. Here, I want to highlight the connection between nationalist ascetics, masculinity and militarization for their staggering impact on mainstream contemporary patriotic discourse as well as present-day masculine aesthetics and embodiment (as publicly espoused by popular figures like Sanjay Dutt).

prowess of the British, the real “other” of the Hindu nation for him is the Muslims. While his earlier writings demonstrated that Hindus and Muslims had worked together as a community united against the British, his later writings depict Muslims and Mughal emperors as the greatest aggressors against the Hindu people and nation.¹⁰⁶ Savarkar explains the defeat of brave Hindu warriors at the hands of the Mughals due to Emperor Ashoka’s embrace of Buddhism and Buddhist nonviolence. He would later criticize Gandhi for the same doctrine of non-violence and its dilution of Hindu masculine valor. During this time he also articulated his vision of the modern Indian citizen and his policy on minorities in India by declaring, “The Hindu Mahasabha (unified party or organization of Hindus) aims to base the future constitution of Hindustan on the broad principle that all citizens should have equal rights and obligations irrespective of caste or creed, race or religion, provided they avow and owe an exclusive and devoted allegiance to the Hindustani state.”¹⁰⁷ Never fully elaborating on exactly what is entailed in the “exclusive allegiance” to the Hindustani state, Savarkar made Muslims and other minorities vulnerable to being accused of failing to show allegiance. Resonating with Bankim’s call for a balance in force and mercy when dealing with minorities, the idea of benevolence and tolerance toward minorities by the rightful citizens of India – Hindus (men) – found further elaboration here.

While Savarkar’s was a militarized masculinity residing in physical strength and patriotism, Swami Vivekananda’s Hindu masculinity resided in his notion of “muscular spirituality.” His version of Hindu masculinity was personified by the warrior-monk

¹⁰⁶ Sikata Banerjee, *Make me a Man! Masculinity, Hinduism, and Nationalism in India*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005. pp. 50-56

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Banerjee (2005) p. 57.

figure. To be clear, Vivekananda was very keen on the physical strength of young Hindu men as well. He attributed the effeminacy of Hindus to the Vaishnavas (followers of the sixteenth century Saint Sri Chaitanya of Bengal, who preached nonviolence and universal love). Vivekananda, unlike even Savarkar, did not seek to be equal to the British colonizers and their martial/masculine power. Instead he sought dominance over the British and the entire world. The warrior-monk, according to Vivekananda, had two duties – one to protect the Hindu nation, and two, to conquer through physical strength, moral and spiritual fortitude.¹⁰⁸ It is due to cultural superiority that the warrior-monk will prevail over the military power of the colonizers or any other aggressors, according to Vivekananda. Indeed Vivekananda's notion of masculine ascetics seemed to overlap a great deal with Bankim Chandra's freedom fighters in his novel *Anandmath* (1882). For both nationalist leaders, the quest for a Hindu nation was crucially linked to developing a self-disciplined, virile and spiritually sound masculinity. For Vivekananda, the creation of such male leaders or warrior-monks would be facilitated by education. Denouncing British education, Vivekananda advanced a Vedic system of schooling within the guru-shishya parampara (teacher-pupil relationship where the pupil lived with the teacher and completely immersed himself in his own education and the service of his teacher). Much like Bankim's ethics of nationalist leaders, Vivekananda's warrior-monk was also to practice celibacy as one of the core ways in which to preserve his masculine valor. However, his view of celibacy was also explicitly extended to women.

Vivekananda believed that women should model themselves on the self-sacrificing, patient, ever-faithful figure of Sita, and that womanhood should find its full

¹⁰⁸ Banerjee (2005) p. 61.

fruition within the domestic sphere, and especially within motherhood. He idealized Hindu women as pious, pure and dutiful wives and mothers, as a way to denounce Western women as improper and degenerate. Although his views on women, both Indian and foreign, varied and sometimes even contradicted themselves, his repeated idealization of Indian women as chaste, served as an effective tactic to challenge British masculinity by degrading and denouncing the honor of “their women.”¹⁰⁹ This anti-colonial discursive tactic gained much popularity in that not only did it cast Indian women as pure and honorable, but also made Indian women emblematic of the Indian nation – a chaste and holy motherland placed in the charge of culturally, physically and spiritually steadfast men. It is this reconceptualization of the gendered relationship between the citizen, the modern nation and indeed, the independent Indian state, that to this day finds resonance within public discourse.

As has been demonstrated in this section, the reformist and revivalist period within late nineteenth and turn of the century Indian nationalist milieu set up the material and discursive conditions for certain modalities of masculinity over others. In reaction to the effeminizing gaze of the colonizers, this period saw the very identity and essence of the Indian nation elaborate itself within the Hindu male’s body and actions, which was produced as the modern, humanist solution to the problem of an ancient, effeminate, and unworthy population incapable of self-rule.

It is in M.K. Gandhi’s thought and writings that we see the most profound theorization of this somatic nationalism. His belief in the intimate link between

¹⁰⁹ Banerjee (2005) p.65.

sexuality/desire and social/political power was highly influential, especially as this theory of nationalism drew on pervasive Hindu notions of renunciation and self-control. He reconfigured personal self-control and celibacy into radical social criticism, transformation and nationalism.¹¹⁰ While Gandhi certainly drew on the classical Vedic concept of brahmacharya or celibacy, his modern notion of celibacy and self-control marked a departure from the original. The Vedic concept of brahmacharya is the first stage of the four fold ashrama cycle of life stages. Specifically, it is a ritual vow of celibacy as part of a larger training program for the disciplined study of the Vedas for Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya boys. Thus, unlike for Gandhi, celibacy and chastity in this context was a “practical pedagogical principle and not a general rule of moral conduct prescribed for all Hindus.”¹¹¹ Neither was it the medicalized concept that it went on to become within Gandhi’s modern formulation in which celibacy came to signal bodily health and vitality. A central obsession of the literature on brahmacharya in this period was to do with the multiple facets of male sex and sexuality, much more than moral or spiritual desire. Specifically, detailed attention was paid to the mechanics and chemistry of semen, as semen was regarded the indispensable and quintessential life-force. “The whole purpose of brahmacharya,” explains Joseph Alter, “is to build up a resilient store of semen so that the body – in a historic, psychosomatic sense – radiates an aura of vitality and strength.”¹¹² Gandhi himself subscribed to this conceptualization at least in part, as he insisted that, “All power comes from the preservation and

¹¹⁰ Joseph S. Alter, “Celibacy, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Gender into Nationalism in North India”, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (Feb., 1994), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 45-66

¹¹¹ Alter (1994) pp. 47-48.

¹¹² Alter (1994) p. 51

sublimation of the vitality that is responsible for the creation of life...Perfectly controlled thought is itself power of the highest potency and becomes self-acting...Such power is impossible in one who dissipates his energy in any way whatsoever.”¹¹³ Additionally, as Alter argues, brahmacharya, in Gandhi’s thought and in the popular imagination, emerged as a strategic concept in opposition to Westernization. It was conceptualized as an alternative moral and physical regimen for the management of colonial and postcolonial native desire, strength and integrity.

In the late colonial and postcolonial era, the discourse around brahmacharya made the body the site of nationalism, and celibacy its way to reform. The nationalism invoked through this kind of rhetoric was embodied on an individual level and citizenship imagined as a psychosomatic attribute. However, the citizen’s body is also a key element that shapes social institutions like the family. The family, in the discourse of celibacy, is not a space that should be regarded as free from bodily (sexual) control. The moral vitality and physical strength of the male citizen is best preserved only if he indulges in strictly procreative sex. So in a departure from the late nineteenth century discourse on “spiritual” nationalism where the family was considered outside the realm of politics, the Hindu nationalist injunction of celibacy makes the family a central site of national reform as well as pride. Specifically, the Sangathan (unification) movement of the 1920s, had politicized the role of the family in which the Hindu male was the agent

¹¹³ M.K. Gandhi, *Self-Restraint v. Self-Indulgence*, Ahmedabad, 1958, p. 56. Quoted in Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India*, The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1967, p. 197

of national reform and military power, and the woman was not only a subservient wife or mother, but also a sister in the army of the united Hindu army, if needed.¹¹⁴

Hindu masculinity, as mentioned before, was not only constructed in opposition to the “Westerner” and the colonizing British masculinity, but also in opposition to the Muslim ‘other,’ within the Sangathan movement. The history of the Hindu encounter with the Mughal empire and Muslim “invaders” was re-narrated and re-appropriated in order to generate cultural acceptance of the figure of the Muslim man as a lustful, degenerate rapist. The preservation and protection of Hindu women against the Muslim male, was thus essential to the preservation of Hindu community, nation and by extension, masculinity, argues Charu Gupta.¹¹⁵ Gupta’s argument provides legs to my own assertion that the project of Hindu masculinity is one that is often undertaken as a response to a real or constructed “crisis” in which the exceptionality of the contemporary politico-historical moment justifies Hindu male supremacy and the strengthening of control over Hindu women. She adds, “What was involved here was a self-image of a community at ‘war.’ By branding Muslim men as rapists and Hindu women as victims, there was also an attempt to efface differences based on class/caste within each community.”¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Charu Gupta, “Articulating Hindu Masculinity and Femininity: ‘Shuddhi’ and ‘Sangathan’ Movements in the United Provinces in the 1920s” in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 33, No. 13 Mumbai: Sameeksha Trust (Mar. 26-Apr.3, 1998), pp. 727-735.

¹¹⁵ Gupta (1998) p.730. Gupta specifically highlights the re-appropriation of the legend of Padmini and Alauddin by conservative Hindu nationalists in order to give meaning to the contemporary stereotype of the virile and rapist Muslim, proliferated by the Hindu mahasabha in tracts such as “Chand Musalmanon Ki Harkaten” (The Deeds of some Muslims).

¹¹⁶ Gupta (1998) p.730

Crisis Is as “Crisis” Does

The figure of the enemy is not restricted to the construction of a single “other,” within Hindu supremacist discourse. Rustom Bharucha (1995) demonstrates how the crisis of Hindu masculinity is rooted in the creation of multiple others that are variously imagined as threats to Hindu tradition, virility and fertility. In his reading of documentary filmmaker Anand Patwardhan’s acclaimed film *Father, Son and Holy War* (1995), Bharucha provides evidence that while being Muslim is considered the ultimate anti-national form of being, it is associated with the respectable traits of aggression and sexual potency. On the other hand, espousing secularism, and/or refusing to condone violence and militancy are looked upon as emasculating traits, revealing the “incredible layering of sexuality, potency, and militancy in the construction of masculinity” within Hindu right-wing rhetoric.¹¹⁷ In a more contemporary, though geographically distant context, Lauren Berlant speaks relevantly of the ways in which white American heterosexual hegemonic masculinity is often described as a site of injury and loss which is narrated within public discourse as what she calls a “scandal of ex-privilege.”¹¹⁸ The loss experienced by “iconic citizens” – in Berlant’s argument, the white American

¹¹⁷ Rustom Bharucha, “Dismantling Men: Crisis of Male Identity in ‘Father, Son and Holy War’”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 30, No. 26, Mumbai: Sameeksha Trust, July 1, 1995, pp. 1611. Bharucha quotes from Patwardhan’s film, “Let Rao and V P Singh becomes Muslims’; Let Rao wear a sari’; ‘Wearing saris is a sin (paap)’.” He further notes, “When women are not specifically invoked in the categorisation of ‘them’ and ‘us’, the metaphor that dominates the political discourse in the film concerns the potency of men. It is first introduced by a fanatical VHP religious leader who rails against the secular mechanisms of the Indian parliament. ‘They wanted to make us impotent’. Later in the film, he refers to the politicians as, hijras, thereby reversing the threat of impotency into an abuse. Extending his phallogocentric discourse in an even more strident register, his colleague, Sadhvi Rithambara, titillates the predominantly male audience by playing on the patriarchal norms of ‘izzat’ and revenge. Targeting Mulayam Singh Yadav, she rails: ‘Why do you need arms? To kill a eunuch, why waste a bullet? We’re Hindu, India is ours’. It is through such rhetoric that ‘impotent secularism’ is set against ‘potent Hinduism’.” (Bharucha [1995] p. 1611).

¹¹⁸ Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1997, p. 2.

heterosexual male, and in the Indian context, the upper-caste, upper class Hindu male – is of losing the privilege of being an unmarked normative citizen who is seen as naturally and historically entitled to the nation. The common sense surrounding this narrative is that the imagined nation and its iconic citizen's way of life is in need of restoration. It invokes resentment for the stereotypically constructed and othered citizens,

who have appeared to change the political rules of social membership, and with it, a desperate desire to return to an order of things deemed normal...To effect either restoration of the imagined nation, the American ex-icon denigrates the political present tense and incites nostalgia for the national world of its iconicity, setting up that lost world as a utopian horizon of political aspiration.¹¹⁹

In the Indian context, it is this “scandal of ex-privilege” that allows for a rhetorical reconfiguration of upper caste, middle class Hindu men into a threatened and victimized group of people being ousted out of (unmarked) privilege by Muslims, dalits, tribals and even women. Especially in the wake of the Mandal commission's recommendations for educational and job reservations for the lower castes, the reactionary rhetoric proliferated by the urban Hindu right has become commonplace. Reservations and affirmative action for Muslims, lower-castes and women have given currency to the belief that Hindu (upper-caste) men are discriminated against and divested from. As Berlant alerts us, it is crucial to note the ways in which such reactionary rhetoric accrues power and longevity precisely due to having become banal and so deeply ingrained in the public consciousness. The simultaneous power and banality of the restoration narrative of Hindu masculinity is exemplified poignantly in Sanjay Dutt's recent public service announcement-like advertisement.

¹¹⁹ Berlant (1997) p.2

Dutt's message echoes the anti-colonial nationalist trope of investing the "revolutionary" (as in "kranti") restoration of the Hindu citizen-subject's socio-cultural prestige, political legitimacy, military might and racial/physical superiority with gendered significance. Dutt's injunction to Bharat ke mard (the men of India) to give up their feminine ways in favor of a more robust, rugged and consumerist masculinity carries with it the subtext of not just misogyny and homophobia, but also historical anxieties around loss of Hindu cultural identity, and westernization. The Hindu male must diligently apply himself to approximating the ideal notion of Hindu masculinity within Dutt's message. That is to say that the Hindu male must discipline himself to be more and more "Hindu" if the cultural and economic status of the Indian nation is to be maintained. Indeed, Sanjay Dutt's own media reinvention of himself as a devout Hindu after being booked under the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (TADA) in 1993 for illegal possession of arms and alleged involvement in the Bombay communal riots, is a good example of the ways in which such self-disciplining is made essential.¹²⁰ Dutt was accused of having ties with and procuring illegal weapons from Anees Ibrahim, brother of Dawood Ibrahim who allegedly masterminded and financed the 1993 Bombay blasts and who has executed a number of illegal operations with Islamic extremist terrorist groups based in the UAE.¹²¹ Ever since he narrowly and nepotistically¹²² escaped rigorous lifetime imprisonment under TADA, Sanjay Dutt has

¹²⁰ Ashish Khetan and Harinder Baweja. "The Sanjay Dutt Cover up: How the Star Escaped TADA" in *Tehelka* March 24, 2007. New Delhi.

http://www.tehelka.com/story_main28.asp?filename=Ne240307How_the_CS.asp&id=1

¹²¹ Son of Fatima Rashid (screen name: Nargis), one of the greatest actresses in the history of Bollywood cinema, Dutt explained his actions to his father Sunil Dutt by saying, "Because I have Muslim blood in my veins. I could not bear what was happening in the city." (Khetan and Baweja. [2012])

¹²² Khetan and Baweja (2012)

been keenly presenting himself as a tilak-wearing¹²³ pious Hindu to the media. His Hinduized public image, together with his PSA-like ads imbued with Hindu nationalist rhetoric, serve as an allegorical corrective to his own transgression of identifying with Muslim discontent in a Hindu supremacist nation. It seems Dutt realizes all too well that a crisis in his Hindu identity and allegiance to the Hindu nation can only be resolved through staging and resolving a crisis in masculinity, that the two projects are embedded in one another. Echoing conservative prescriptions for saving Hindu masculinity from cultural, sectarian, religious and economic diminishment, he inadvertently exposes the cobbled-together-ness of different affective and consumerist practices that have come to constitute contemporary masculinity.

In more recent years, in the aftermath of the purported rise of sexual assault¹²⁴ and sexual violence against working class, urban women¹²⁵ there has been much renewed discussion in the public sphere, online as well as offline, about how the root of this problem might be a “crisis in Indian masculinity.” This latest iteration of the crisis harks back to the skewed power relations within globalized urban India, wherein urban working women are seen as evidence of the loosening of traditional male role of breadwinner, the mobile and rightful claimant of public space. The sexual violence

¹²³ Mark or line drawn on the forehead with powder or paste applied in order to mark Hindu caste identity, or right after worship, or to honor a deity or personage, or to mark a ceremonial event. Not to be confused with the red dot (bindi) worn by women. A tilak may be worn by both men and women, as well as on certain parts of the body other than the forehead.

¹²⁴ I say “purported” due to the fact that most statistics are drawn from police and court records, and cannot account for the majority of the acts of violence against women that go unreported even within urban areas. Further, the recent contention that sexual assault is on the rise should be held up against the normalized and ignored treatment of caste-based violence against rural and urban-poor women.

¹²⁵ Specifically the gangrape of the photojournalist in Mumbai in 2013, the April 2013 rape and death of the five-year old girl in New Delhi, and the brutal gangrape and execution of the young physiotherapist Jyoti Singh in New Delhi, in December 2012.

against working women is conceived then, as an effective equalizing strategy, a form of class-based and communal retribution (a historically recurrent trope). One journalist, Kavitha Iyer, even likens these incidents to the contemporary recreational rite-of-passage gangrapes in parts of South Africa: jackrolling.¹²⁶ Iyer confirms in the context of sexual violence, the prevailing sentiment of “maja aata hai”¹²⁷ of one young Hindu rioter when asked how he feels committing acts of communal violence, in the aforementioned film by Patwardhan.

What emerges here is a certain nonchalant banality of the experience of perpetrating violence that seems at odds with narratives of exceptionality and crisis when used to explain masculine exertion of power. These narratives of crisis themselves, however, do seem to function as effective and affective ways to stage the overcoming of upper-caste anxieties of modernity, globalization and resultant reconfigurations of gender roles.¹²⁸ In this context, Sanjay Dutt’s advertisement performs this role successfully, by selling the crisis itself as a commodity in the Haywards 5000 club soda ad. The critique of the way advertisements construct women as ideal housewives or as objects for consumption by men is well known. However, advertising in India has tended to focus more on men as consumers of identity-related products such as clothing, mobile technology, cars, quartz watches, underwear, grooming products, all of which encourage men to overcome their own class, gender and bodily insecurities by embracing products

¹²⁶ Kavitha Iyer, “Gangrape: Why we must look at the crisis of masculinity”, *FirstPost India*, August 28, 2013, Web. Accessed June 2, 2014. <http://www.firstpost.com/india/gangrape-why-we-must-look-at-the-crisis-of-masculinity-1066031.html>

¹²⁷ Quoted in Bharucha, (1995) p. 1611. Translation: “It’s fun.”

¹²⁸ See Prem Chowdhry, “‘First Our Jobs Then Our Girls’: The Dominant Caste Perceptions on the ‘Rising’ Dalits”, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 43, Issue 2, Cambridge: University of Cambridge, March 2009, pp. 437-479.

and pleasures that were previously considered undesirable or sometimes even unmanly. Whether it is the muscular masculinity of the akharas discussed earlier in this chapter, or the stoic semen-conserving celibate masculinity of the Gandhian era, or the advent of the metrosexual man who is far more invested in the luxuries and pleasures of the body, the idea of Indian masculinity under crisis has always been capitalized on within advertising and has helped shape particular kinds of masculinities by emphasizing a return to traditional hierarchies of gender, caste and class.¹²⁹

Simultaneously, in the wake of the recent mediatized rapes in Indian metropolises, there has been some scholar-activist meditation on what could comprise effective protest and political action against this reinvigorated misogyny and gendered violence. The intensely affect-laden national mobilization and large-scale protests after the rape and murder of Jyoti Singh in Delhi in December 2012, brought up questions around the singularity of the protest and the reasons for the relatively subdued reactions to the following incidents. Pinky Hota notes that the December protests had been successful in yoking together national “protest publics” and a coming to the center of women’s rights in an unprecedented way.¹³⁰ However, by the time the subsequent

¹²⁹ See Mazarella (2003), Srivastava (2004).

¹³⁰ Pinky Hota, “Rape as National Crisis in India”, *Anthropology News*, American Anthropological Association, Web, Accessed June 3, 2014. <http://www.anthropology-news.org/index.php/2013/06/04/rape-as-national-crisis-in-india/> “In the highly fragmented, plural and stratified context of India, Indian feminists and political commentators agreed that it was indeed hopeful that these new protest publics seemed to cut across class, gender and caste profiles. These national protest publics also sought to make connections to larger supranational publics, such as in the case of the One Billion Rising campaign. These connections were crucial in reminding international civil society that violence against women is not just a South Asian problem, but one with patterns in common the world over. These protest publics also appeared to have the potential to speak back to democratic practice and legislative change through altered voting practices, sparking hope that for the first time in India, women’s issues could form an active part of the electoral vote. And it was these publics that exerted enough pressure that led the Indian government to create the Justice Verma Committee, which sought to eke out a list of legislative reforms, including widening definitions of

incidents occurred, the “public spoke of these protests as “going nowhere” and bemoaned their “fatigue of feeling unable to ...engage in political protest.”¹³¹ The highly charged political atmosphere of the December protests had given right in to mainstream’s media’s sensationalist tactics, creating a frenzied buzz of activist, scholar, legislative, journalist activity, but ultimately proving to be an unsustainable political movement. In this context, Hota argues, “Jyoti Singh Pandey’s rape then became a moment at which India came to understand how much further it has to walk towards the ideal of liberal modernity, but also perhaps, it came to realize that it was too fatigued to make that journey.”¹³² What Hota is pointing to is the spatio-temporal lag that is perceived as intrinsic to postcoloniality which is seen as perpetually engaged in but also failing in its attempt to catch up to Western modernity.

In the following chapters, I want to put pressure on such discourses of crisis and lag, one marking the contestation over normative gendered subjectivity and the other marking the spatio-temporal lag in postcolonial modernity and political becoming, respectively, wherein the latter provides the epistemological and ontological context for the former and vice versa. I seek to explore these discourses not necessarily to argue with or against them so much as to read them as sites of possibility. After all, it is no coincidence that at a time when the Indian State is enacting the most repressive policies vis a vis Kashmiris, North Eastern people, Maoists and dissent from various other sources, and when the Indian government has been exposed for its rampant corruption

rape and assault as well as changes in police and legal process that would improve the documentation and prosecution of sexual assaults.”

¹³¹ Hota (2014).

¹³² Hota (2014)

and dysfunctionality, the LGBT movement has nevertheless made some gains both at the juridical level¹³³ and at the level of public discourse. As a conclusion to this chapter, I want to offer that, while the narrative of crisis becomes the rhetorical bedrock of hegemonic constructions of gender and sexuality, specifically masculinity, at the same time, it is in the moment of performing crisis, that those who are constructed as others to be staved off become incorporated into hegemonic culture. If the LGBT movement has made progress, it is because it has adopted hegemonic culture and become a site for that hegemony to stabilize itself. Given, in particular, the ways in which Hindu nationalism acts through the masculine subject, especially whilst locating that masculinity as perpetually in need of saving from crisis, the performance of *female* masculinity needs must be a negotiation with and at least in part be enabled by the same cultural tropes and consumptive practices that make up hegemonic Hindu masculinity.

¹³³ The reading down of Article 377 of the Indian Constitution by the Delhi High Court in 2009, which has now been reversed by the Supreme Court of India.

Chapter 2

“He calls me ‘girl’/I call him ‘fatso’”: Developing Female Masculinity as an Analytical Lens

Prelude

Documentary filmmaker Ambarien Alqadar’s film *Who Can Speak of Men?* (2003)¹³⁴ provides a portrait of three people living in the Muslim-dominated area comprising the Okhla, Zakir Nagar and Jamia Milia Islamia University neighborhoods in South Delhi. Publicity material from The British Film Institute 19th Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, London, UK describes the film as “[a]n astonishing intimate documentary about working class Muslim women in India who refuse to conform to feminine norms.”¹³⁵ In a scene shot at night on a rooftop with one of the three participants, the director asks Arshi (the participant) what kind of neighborhood Okhla is and how long Arshi has lived there. Arshi explains that the neighborhood is home mostly to middle-class Muslim families that are “narrow minded,” “as one would expect from Muslim families.” On being pressed to say more, Arshi adds that women in the area wear burqas and the people are not open to new thoughts or ways of life. The camera cuts to a shot of boxes upon boxes of bangles lining the inside of a small neighborhood shop. The shots of the bangle shop are overlaid with Arshi’s voice explaining extant gender norms in the

¹³⁴ *Who Can Speak of Men?* dir. Ambarien Alqadar, 2003.

¹³⁵ Description attributed to New Films from the Asian Diaspora, The British Film Institute 19th Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, London, UK.; quoted on filmmaker Ambarien Alqadar’s website: <http://cargocollective.com/ambarienalqadar/filter/documentary/Who-Can-Speak-of-Men>

community, which then gives way to a few seconds of non-diegetic soundtrack of the lyric “choodi jo khanki haathon mein” (“when my bangles jingled on my wrists”) sung by contemporary pop singer Falguni Pathak.¹³⁶ The film cuts back to the shot of Arshi in the dark, explaining that they¹³⁷ have little tolerance for harassment on the street, often landing them in “serious fights” with strangers. They explain:

“The comments are usually of two types. Either I get teased being compared to Bollywood actors; ‘oh look his hairstyle is like Shah Rukh Khan, no Aamir Khan’...like this. But honestly, I don’t find those all that offensive. But when someone asks “is that a boy or a girl?” then I feel bad and get into fights...One time I was walking down the street here in Okhla and there were three guys sitting at a street corner. One of them made this comment – ‘is it a boy or a girl?’ I heard it but didn’t know which one of the three had said it. So I turned around, walked up to them and asked, ‘Who asked that question?’ Two of them stood speechless while the third was smirking. I figured it was this third guy who had made the comment. So I served him with a hard slap across his face, the strongest I could muster. All three of them looked shaken up. Then I said, ‘Now look, if that felt light handed, it was a girl’s; if it really hurt, it was a boy’s’ (laughs)”¹³⁸

Introduction

A consideration of “female masculinity” cannot begin without first acknowledging its indebtedness to Judith ‘Jack’ Halberstam’s popularization of the term.¹³⁹ In the last sixteen or so years since Halberstam’s groundbreaking book *Female Masculinity* (1998) was first published, the term “female masculinity” has gained

¹³⁶ See Falguni Pathak’s song “Yaad Piya ki Aane Lagi” YouTube music video, 1998 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQ3qAcb4W14>

¹³⁷ I use the gender neutral pronoun “they” for Arshi because in the film they speak in Urdu and use the honorific/formal register to refer to themselves, thus never needing to gender themselves male or female.

¹³⁸ Hindustani original: “Ab dekh lijo, agar halka phulka haath pada, samajh le ladki ka tha, agar zyada pad gaya, toh ladke ka tha”

¹³⁹ Henceforth I will use male pronouns and ‘Jack’ for first name for Judith ‘Jack’ Halberstam going by his preference as stated in personal communication and on his blog post “On Pronouns”, <http://www.jackhalberstam.com/on-pronouns/>.

visibility, as well as become a contested term to denote a range of embodiments of masculinity by female-born people. Then and now, scholarly attention to female- and/or transmasculinities is cursory in comparison to male- and or/ transfemininities both globally and in India. This chapter, and indeed this dissertation, elaborates on the political and analytical possibilities that emerge from studying female masculinities for LGBTQ social movements and feminist thought in India. In the following sections, I will begin by contextualizing my use of the term female masculinity within queer and masculinity studies scholarship and address the critiques that female masculinity has mostly functioned as a self-evident term that reinforces binary constructions of gender, rather than dismantling them. I will then use two video documentaries, Ambarien Alqadar's *Who Can Speak of Men?* (2003) and Sherna Dastur's *Manjuben Truckdriver* (2002), in order to demonstrate the need for an intersectional analysis of female masculinity, which not only reveals the instability of gendered binaries, but also provides us with productive entry points into other social categories like class, religion and nation. The purpose of this chapter is to contribute to contemporary feminist and queer studies debates in India on the topics of intersectionality, Hindu nationalism, and gendered violence, with female masculinity as an analytical lens.

Halberstam contends that as opposed to male femininities, female masculinity has been an under-researched topic and that its usefulness derives from its ability to pry apart the social performance and embodiment of masculinity from biological maleness. He convincingly argues against the heterosexist and cisgender formulation that female masculinity is a mere copy of the psychologically normal and culturally legible male masculinity, positing it in fact as a gender formation in its own right. The component

parts and machinations of “dominant masculinity” that are otherwise naturalized, become visible as masculinity only when they leave white male middle-class bodies, Halberstam provocatively claims.¹⁴⁰ In constructing black and latino/a masculinities as excessive and threatening, and Asian and homosexual masculinities as passive and inadequate, white male bodies are produced as the most legitimate and ideologically dominant masculinity. Thus, for Halberstam, it is when masculinity is embodied by women that it “seems most informative about gender relations and most generative of social change.”¹⁴¹ At the same time, Halberstam does not deem it necessary to explain what comprises this masculinity that he invokes.¹⁴² Gardiner suggests that Halberstam seems to consider masculinity as self-evident and always already associated with power. In this chapter, like Halberstam, I will not be undertaking the task of defining masculinity,¹⁴³ as I find this exercise moot in light of Judith Butler’s theory of performativity that proposes that gender is constructed through discursive categories that are kept in circulation through a process of repetition and citation – a process that produces that which it considers its origin.¹⁴⁴ Neither do I posit female masculinity as an “alternative masculinity,” thereby replacing one myth of presence with another. Even conceptions of “dominant” as well as “subordinate”

¹⁴⁰ Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1998, p.2.

¹⁴¹ Halberstam (1998) p.3

¹⁴² See Judith Kegan Gardiner’s “Female Masculinity and Phallic Women: Unruly Concepts”, *Feminist Studies* 38, no. 3, College Park: University of Maryland, Fall 2012, pp. 584-611 and Pablo Perez Navarro’s “Absences that Matter: Performativity and Female Masculinities” in *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, 66; Tenerife, Canary Islands: Universidad de la Laguna, April 2013, pp. 49-64 for discussions of this absence.

¹⁴³ Halberstam (1998) p.3

¹⁴⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge, 1990, p. 178: “Consider that a sedimentation of gender norms produces the peculiar phenomenon of a “natural sex” or “real woman” or any number of prevalent and compelling social fictions, and that this is a sedimentation that over time has produced a set of corporeal styles which, in reified form, appear as the natural configuration of bodies into sexes existing in a binary relation to one another. If these styles are enacted, and if they produce the coherent gendered subjects who pose as their originators, what kind of performance might reveal this ostensible “cause” to be an effect?”

masculinities are not static formulations that remain unchanged over time and place, especially when read intersectionally.¹⁴⁵ Instead, in this chapter and dissertation, I call attention to the way both “female” and “masculinity” are perpetually held in tension vis-à-vis each and other and with contemporary social norms, in order to highlight the instability and elusiveness of those same normative systems. In the next section I address the concerns and allegations leveled at bodies that embody female masculinity by several feminist scholars and activists in India and elsewhere, in which any identification with masculinity is a desire for the maintenance of gendered power, rather than a deconstruction of it.

Who Can Speak of Masculinity?

The political and ethical difficulty for feminists (lesbian or otherwise) with female-born people who seek to embody and approximate masculinity, is well illustrated by Arshi’s retort to the three boys on the street corner that teased Arshi.¹⁴⁶ When asked by the neighborhood boys if Arshi is a girl or a boy, Arshi slaps the culprit hard, watches him reel, and says, “if that felt light handed, it was a girl’s; if it really hurt, it was a boy’s.” Arshi’s words are most easily interpreted as sexist, with an implication that girls lack physical strength, whereas boys can do some actual damage. Read rhetorically, they

¹⁴⁵ For a rich discussion of the critiques of typological and trait oriented “hegemonic” masculinity, see “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept”, by R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, *Gender Society*, 2005; 19; p. 829.

¹⁴⁶ See Prelude for a detailed description of the incident, as narrated by one of the protagonists of Ambarien Alqadar’s video documentary *Who Can Speak of Men?*

demonstrate how quickly masculine gender nonconforming people (henceforth, gnc)¹⁴⁷ might deploy misogyny as a way to gain social legitimacy and be recognized as masculine. This is certainly not an inaccurate assessment, as it is well established that masculinity often props itself up by constructing femininity as inferior and inadequate. Many masculine gnc are no exception to this, especially as the psychological or physical costs of being identified as female/not passing as male are often high. Nevertheless, Arshi's retort is worthy of the charge of misogyny.

However, I want to push our reading of this exchange further and argue that Arshi's retort is not in fact a rhetorical utterance, but an open-ended one that relies on Arshi's perpetrator to complete the process of gendering. Embedded in the retort is an obvious counter-question, "what do *you* think, am I boy or a girl?" but also a less obvious one, "how much did that hurt *you*?" So the teasing boy's ability to answer Arshi's question about how he would gender Arshi relies on his experience of pain. In other words, in this interaction, the classification of Arshi's gender is determined by the perpetrator's ability to endure and concede pain and not in the essence or even appearance of Arshi's gender. In this way, not only is Arshi's (female/improper) masculinity revealed to be prone to questioning, but also her male perpetrator's masculinity demonstrated as unstable and vulnerable. The gendered metrics of pain, the experience of it, and the ability to endure it, turn the question "are you a man" or "are you

¹⁴⁷ gnc – I use "gnc" as a more gender neutral alternative to Halberstam's "masculine women" vs. "F2M" (female to male). gnc is my open-ended descriptor for people who embody different kinds of female masculinity that may be born "female" but experience varying levels of gender dysphoria: some are comfortable owning not only femaleness but also womanhood as long as they are understood as masculine, others may completely disavow any association with biological femaleness. I deliberately do not capitalize "gnc" as I do not intend on positing it as an identity category/technical term. For future reference, I use gender neutral pronouns (such as "they") for documentary or real-life subjects who use various linguistic strategies to either avoid gendering themselves or use gender-neutral registers to speak about themselves.

man enough” right back at the boy who asked Arshi that same question, and who is then compelled to contend with his own subjection to gendered norms. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) Sara Ahmed asks how lived experiences of pain (being *in* pain) might be shaped by contact with others.¹⁴⁸ While it is clear how *claims* to pain or collective suffering become the basis of identity and politics in public discourse, the experience of pain is often treated as unrepresentable. She thus sets out to explore “how the ‘labour’ of pain and the ‘language’ of pain work in specific and determined ways to affect differences between bodies.”¹⁴⁹ Ahmed argues that pain is experienced as an intensified sensation that intrudes upon the surface and coherence of the body, an intrusion that makes one aware of one’s boundaries in the first place. She explains, “I become aware of bodily limits *as* my bodily dwelling or dwelling place when I am in pain. Pain is hence bound up with how we inhabit the world, how we live in relationship to the surfaces, bodies and objects that make up our dwelling places.”¹⁵⁰ Her argument undermines the distinction between subject and object, by insisting that neither exists prior to contact with others. If things take shape, form and meaning in the moment of contact – in Arshi’s case, the slap across the face and her perpetrator’s endurance of pain becomes the contact – it reshapes the particular meanings and form that the young boy’s embodiment of gender dwells in. Far from being a copy of what is considered normative masculinity, female masculinity then has the potential to denaturalize and *remake* “dominant” masculinity by re-scripting moments of violent contact and subjugation into moments of *mutual* vulnerability.

¹⁴⁸ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultrual Politics of Emotion*, New York: Routledge, 2004.

¹⁴⁹ Ahmed (2004) p. 23

¹⁵⁰ Ahmed (2004) p. 27

This mutual vulnerability pushes back on recent feminist readings of female masculinity that persist in formulating masculinity as something coherent and indispensable, even as one might set out to critique it. While discussing the heroic female masculinity of women warriors in Hong Kong action cinema and how they are mistakenly read as powerful and subversive figures, Kwai-Cheung Lo offers an appraisal of female masculinity. Reading female masculinity as just another site that consolidates masculine dominance, he contends,

“Multiplying or pluralizing masculinity in different alternative versions (as with the multiplication of modernity) even by inventing “female masculinity” for women, I would say, does not really pose a significant challenge to the established notion, which is fundamentally left unquestioned. Indeed, multiplicity or pluralization only helps make the ideology of masculinity even stronger and more powerful, turning it into a stable origin or foundation exempted from any radical deconstruction.”¹⁵¹

Female masculinity is not only seen as a problematic configuration in such accounts, but also seems to occupy the space of the unintelligible other. Lo, certainly not alone in this understanding, collapses female masculinity into womanhood and masculinity into eternal dominance (or at least a metanarrative of the “ideology of masculinity”) even as he sets out to critique similar impulses in Halberstam’s and others’ conceptions of female masculinity. Another moment from the documentary *Who Can Speak of Men?* provides insights into the everyday experience of embodying female masculinity even for a young person. A seven-year-old masculine gnc named Chini is told by the filmmaker:

“Your friend Faizi said that when you come back from school you hide your face...

Chini: I don’t like wearing frocks. That’s why.

Filmmaker: Does your teacher allow you to wear other clothes to school?

¹⁵¹ Kwai-Cheung Lo, *Excess and Masculinity in Asian Cultural Productions*, New York: SUNY Press, 2010, p. 107-108

Chini: No.
 Filmmaker: Did you talk to your teacher about this?
 Chini: No. Mom doesn't want to talk to her about it.
 Filmmaker: [a little pause] Why are there fights with Faizi?
 Chini: Because he misbehaves, teases me ...says I'm a girl. So I call him 'fatso'.
 He gets upset by this.
 Filmmaker: [a little pause] So what if your teacher allows you to wear boys' uniform to school? How will you feel?
 Chini: I'll feel good.
 Filmmaker: So why don't you speak with her?
 Chini: No, she won't listen. And then there will be teasing even at school."

To claim that female masculinity is a mere pluralization of dominant masculinity that creates more space for gendered power and domination, rather than a radical reconfiguration of it, is an arrogant dismissal of the deep discomfort and possibly violence that gnc experience daily. As Chini's story confirms, no matter what age, masculinity on the "wrong"/female body almost always results in opprobrium from the people that occupy one's world, especially for those with limited social mobility. Thus, no matter how much dysphoria one might feel vis-à-vis one's own body and one's ascribed gender, no matter how much one might want to repudiate femininity, one always remains keenly self-conscious of not belonging in the order of things; female *or* male. Masculine power then, is almost entirely elusive for far too many masculine gnc whose masculinity remains unintelligible and unrecognized within heteronormativity – a system that insists on interpellating female masculinity within biologically deterministic ways.¹⁵² Chini, along with each of the other subjects in this documentary, narrates stories about being (mis)recognized or (mis)gendered or rendered illegible: "He teases me...says I'm a girl."

¹⁵² There is no doubt, multiple ways in which power may be accessed by masculine gnc – sometimes gender-affirming surgeries and hormone therapy can result in the temporary privilege of "passing" as a cismale. At other times, gender roles imposed or played with within private/intimate relationships may be in/voluntarily set up to accrue power to the masculine gnc.

In *Excitable Speech*, Judith Butler shows how injurious speech can cause what she calls “linguistic vulnerability.”¹⁵³ Words and language, as much as they constitute a subject in language through interpellation, also have the power to wound. Linguistic injury is an effect of words used to address someone, but also the mode (“a disposition or conventional bearing”) of the address itself. Within the processes of heteropatriarchal and cissexist worlding there is daily occasion for Chini to suffer linguistic injury. So, while in the previous paragraphs, I discussed how bodily pain might become the condition of linguistic re-subjection through mutual vulnerability between the cissexist boy and the gender-nonconforming Arshi, here I want to discuss the pain induced by language itself. Being called a “girl” for Chini is not just a matter of being hailed as a gender that is fundamentally discordant with Chini’s sense of being, but also being designated as inferior to boys/men, within this heteropatriarchal context. Butler contends that to be addressed is not to be recognized for who one is, but to “have the very term conferred by which the recognition of existence becomes possible.”¹⁵⁴ Even more dauntingly, one exists not only by virtue of being recognized (within the terms of the Other) but by being recognizable in the first place. For Chini, her friend’s address then repeats a “social ritual that decide[s], often through exclusion and violence, the linguistic conditions of survivable subjects.”¹⁵⁵

However, Butler argues, the injurious address, which in Chini’s case is being called a “girl”, “may appear to fix or paralyze the one it hails, but it may also...[run] the

¹⁵³ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech*, New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 2

¹⁵⁴ Butler (1997) p. 5

¹⁵⁵ Butler (1997) p. 5

risk of inaugurating a subject in speech who comes to use language to counter the offensive call.”¹⁵⁶ Thus, even when language is used oppressively, victims can somewhat undo the damage caused by injurious language in such a way that the response, “turn[s] one part of that speaking against the other, confounding the performative power of the threat.”¹⁵⁷ Thus, for Butler, injurious language can in fact become the condition, or at least opens up the possibility for the alteration of the terms of discourse, as well as the nature of the injury felt. For instance, Chini’s response to his¹⁵⁸ friend Faizi’s constant verbal teasing is to call him “fatso.” Although Chini’s response does not directly reappropriate a gendered insult and re-signify it, I want to point out that it is precisely because Chini does not fire back with a gendered insult that makes the Faizi’s address infelicitous, and gives us a way to rethink how we might script our injuries. Butler is careful to point out the temporality of linguistic injury and agency, in that words acquire power over time. The moment of utterance is a “condensed historicity,” something that is never a single moment but part of a continuum of “prior and future invocations that constitute and escape the instance of utterance.”¹⁵⁹

For Butler, it is this gap between the utterance and the injury that holds the possibility of “loosening of the link between act and injury,” and reminds us that speech acts do not *have* to effect injury.¹⁶⁰ In responding with “fatso,” Chini responds to an attack on his own psychosexual being and gendered self-definition, with a counter-attack on his friend’s appearance. I am not suggesting that “fatso” is not an insult capable of

¹⁵⁶ Butler (1997) p. 2

¹⁵⁷ Butler (1997)p.12

¹⁵⁸ Chini consistently uses masculine pronouns and identifiers when speaking about himself, therefore I do the same here. Chini is female born and male identified.

¹⁵⁹ Butler (1997) p. 3

¹⁶⁰ Butler (1997) p.15

injuring. Neither is it my intention to offer a hierarchy of insults in which transphobia is “worse” than fatphobia. I am merely pointing out that Chini alters the *terms* of Faizi’s insult by responding with “fatso,” rather than finding a way to effeminize Faizi, or question other aspect of his psychosexual/gendered “normalcy.” In this way, Chini blunts the injury intended in Faizi’s insult by at least partially refusing to be interpellated by its gendered nature. Chini provides us with a way to imagine what Butler calls “linguistic survival”¹⁶¹ – a way to talk back to or refuse interpellation into structures that subjugate gender nonconformity, rather than a search for legal remedy.¹⁶²

Thus far, I hope to have successfully demonstrated that female masculinity is a unique discursive and embodied site that allows not only for non-binary conceptions of gender in India, but also, and perhaps more importantly, that it can yield unexpected modes of resistance and destabilize hegemonic injunctions of gendered belonging. In the next section, I will turn to another video documentary, Sherna Dastur’s *Manjuben Truckdriver* (2003) to meditate on two points, as I further develop female masculinity as an analytical lens through which to understand masculinities and gender itself in India. First, contra Halberstam’s suggestion that female masculinity is best viewed “without men,” I contend that masculine gnc must be studied alongside, not apart from, heterosexual dominant masculinities in order to understand the gendered cultural dynamics in northern India. Second, I will develop on my argument above that female

¹⁶¹ Butler (1997) p.41

¹⁶² Again, I am not suggesting that masculine gnc should take recourse in counter-insults as a political modality. Instead I am calling for a way to deconstruct gendered roles by re-scripting (linguistic) injury and refusing to the call of gender. I would even argue that Chini’s response to Faizi is a case of, simply put, changing the topic.

masculinity can provide a way to rethink the binary between masculine violence vs. feminine victimization that is popular within contemporary public discourse.

“Hum bhi unke saath harami ban jaate hain”/ “We too become bastards with them”

Self-identified Indian “lesbian feminist,” Ashwini Sukthankar, admitted in her 2007 essay, “Complicating Gender: Rights of Transsexuals in India”¹⁶³ that, as she sat down to write the essay, she had to confront her misgivings about the political ramifications of arguing for the rights of those whose identitarian aspirations supposedly re-establish heteronormativity. As a lesbian activist, she worried that supporting the rights of transgender and transsexual people in India “would only aggravate the phenomenon where two women seeking to make a life together are encouraged to believe that one must metamorphose into a man in order for the relationship to be acceptable or recognizable to society.”¹⁶⁴ Sukthankar’s neat separation between lesbians and men is problematized by Halberstam in *Female Masculinity* as he points to the ways in which, in the US, historically and psychoanalytically, lesbian desire has been thought of as masculine and an ‘inversion’ of heterosexual structures of desire. Halberstam then points out, however, that many lesbians are always extremely suspicious of “butch” lesbians (masculine “~~women~~” who desire women) as they consider them to be “dupe[s] of sexological theories of inversion.”¹⁶⁵ He ultimately proposes keeping the term lesbian apart from the term “butch” as butches tend to see themselves as “something other than a woman-identified woman.”¹⁶⁶ Halberstam feels the need to differentiate butches from

¹⁶³ Ashwini Sukthankar, “Complicating Gender: Rights of Transsexuals in India”, *Sexualities* in ed. Nivedita Menon, New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2007, pp. 91 -102

¹⁶⁴ Sukthankar (2007) p. 91

¹⁶⁵ Halberstam (1998) p. 120

¹⁶⁶ Halberstam (1998) p. 120

lesbians due to the all-too-easy cooptation of “butch” within identifications with femininity in lesbian discourses of female same-sex desire. In India, the same issue of cooptation into femininity/womanhood has had a somewhat opposite trajectory. Some of the first articulations of lesbian rights in the late 1990s emerged from within sections of the middle-class feminist movement in India who protested against the ban of Deepa Mehta’s film *Fire* (1998), which depicted lesbian desire. The middle-class lesbian movement in India thus emerged from within the women’s movement and was devoted to affirming femininity and femaleness. Within this imaginary, Sukthankar’s reification of feminine womanhood and masculine (trans)malehood is not an anomaly. Same-sex desire in the lesbian feminist formulation is read as same-gender desire, such that all same-sex formations are read as feminine/woman identified, and the only deviation in gender that is recognized is that of female-to-male transsexuality, leaving no space for gender nonconformity or female masculinity. Thus it is not hard to see why Halberstam conceptualizes female masculinity as a masculinity “without men,” one that is able to stand by itself as a fully-formed gender identity and not merely a transit point to FTM or a copy of a cissexual original. However, as Kale Fajardo has demonstrated in the context of Filipino tomboy masculinities, it is when analyzed alongside male masculinities that other collective identities and cultural affinities (especially along the lines of working-class experiences) become visible.¹⁶⁷ My reading of *Manjuben Truckdriver* draws upon this insight and argues for an intersectional approach to studying (female) masculinities in India. I argue that female masculinity in India must neither be reduced to woman-identified lesbian desire, nor necessarily be considered an identity with its own

¹⁶⁷ Kale Bantigue Fajardo, *Filipino Crosscurrents: Oceanographies of Seafaring, Masculinities, and Globalization*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2011, p. 6

taxonomical force that exists in ontological, epistemological or experiential separation from male masculinity. Indeed, female masculinity, as I read it through the documentary *Manjuben Truckdriver*, occupies an in-betweenness that is generative for feminism and LGBT politics in India.

Manjuben Truckdriver is a curiously structured film that has no linear narrative sequences. It is more a series of vignettes that focus as much on the protagonist Manjuben as they do on the interstate roads on which she drives her truck. Transporting commercial goods between warehouses in small-town Gujarat and markets in Delhi, Manjuben spends most of her day-to-day life on dangerous highways that are littered with broken down or overturned trucks, highway hooligans and inter-state border police. Being the owner of a small trucking business, she employs a clutch of poor and working-class men who seem to respect or fear her. Though mostly she passes as a boy, sometimes this lands her in scraps with the police due to being mistaken for an underage driver. She declares that her main ambitions are to make money and travel and has no qualms about having long divorced her ex-husband, in order to feed those ambitions. There are clear indications in the film that she is romantically involved with a feminine woman, but they do not live together.

A consideration of the interstate highway on which Manjuben plies her truck offers a way to rethink the process of gender nonconforming subjectivation and, indeed, of LGBT politics itself. Manjuben talks about her journey on the road between her town in Gujarat to Delhi as a goal-driven, swift and purposeful journey that is marked by the twin desire to make money through efficient deliveries and the eagerness to return home. The highway in postcolonial India is a relatively recent and distinct marker of state-

sponsored industrialization and economic development. It is the materialization of the rapidly changing nature of the Indian economy from one that was based on socialist ideals in the post-independence era, to a faster-paced market-driven capitalist one. Simultaneously, the road is a classic metaphor for psycho-social progress and development of subjectivity – something that denotes a linear narrative of childhood to adulthood, innocence to maturity, and so on.¹⁶⁸ So, too, is the progression of the proper subject of the Indian LGBT movement imagined – as someone who moves along the road to subjecthood, from repression to self-discovery to coming out and claiming public space and citizenship.

Manjuben's day-to-day life on the highway in fact marks a rupture in this pre-occupation with the forward movement and progress of the rights-bearing LGBT subject. That is to say, Manjuben's female masculinity takes shape in the pauses, halts and interruptions in the journey on the road, and sometimes indeed, on the wayside. It is in the shared masculine time-spaces of rest-stops, police checkpoints and truck breakdowns that Manjuben's masculinity forms and transforms. As we watch her quietly go about her working day from one rest stop to the next, indistinguishable in the group of sleeping

¹⁶⁸ The recent Bollywood film *Highway* (2014) repeats this trope (albeit with some nuance) wherein the daughter of a wealthy industrialist is abducted in a truck for ransom. As she undertakes the truck journey on the highway, she begins to realize how much she has been missing out on while living with her rich but abusive family, and begins to fall in love with her abductor. The journey on the highway proves to be transformational for her, and the film ends with her voluntarily leaving the suffocation and abuse of her home and finding 'freedom' elsewhere. For the working-class man who abducted her, the highway is associated with labor, fatigue and uncertainty, and ends in death. Thus the highway within the Indian imagination is differently configured for the upper and elite classes than for the working class and poor. Manjuben's relationship to the road demonstrates this tension. Within the demands of India's globalizing economy, Manjuben is certainly always on the move in her truck, and she chose to pursue this career because of her love of travel and the sense of freedom the road gives her. But there is also a sense of stuckness and circuitousness of her highway travels, plying the same routes over 12-hour-long shifts. At one point she even narrates her fatigue with the labor and business aspects of trucking and admits to having sold off as many as eight trucks because it was too exhausting for her to manage.

truckers, we also learn about her frequent run-ins with the police or other rest-stop companions about her “correct” gender. These repetitious interruptions function as performative nodal points, within which Manjuben be/comes into her female masculinity. Her masculinity is not something she acquires and hones on her own. It is something that she is compelled to enact, impose and learn from the men she trucks with. These instances of (mis)recognition by fellow truckers and policemen are themselves inconsistent and varied, in that sometimes she passes as a man, sometimes a boy and sometimes she is recognized as female. In turn, her own relative class privilege and ability to demand obedience from her male employees makes her a masculine role model as well, to her employees. In contrast to the stories Manjuben narrates of being misrecognized as a man that may or may not end up unpleasantly, her co-workers, associates and friends at work are variously respectful, obedient or affectionate with her. So, her masculinity can be seen to acquire form in fits and starts, in multiple directions and in playful contestation with male masculinity, rather than in a linear path from less to more, or imagined as separate from male masculinity.

In one scene in the film, Manjuben describes her experience of driving on crowded single-lane highways full of trucks that are anxious to make it to their destinations quickly before their perishable cargo spoils. She explains, “Anybody who knows anything about driving, lets you pass without needing to ask or say anything. And then there are some bastards that just don’t. [Then blows her horn multiple times at another truck in front of hers, effectively making the other driver let her pass/overtake his

truck. Then laughs...] So then we too become bastards with them.”¹⁶⁹ The concept of mimicry as developed in postcolonial theory, specifically by Homi Bhabha, is a useful framework to read Manjuben’s embodiment and negotiation with gender nonconformity in the context of postcolonial liberalizing India. In his essay, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” Bhabha explores the relationship of ambivalence that the colonizers have towards the colonized, through the trope of mimicry.¹⁷⁰ The colonizer produces a mimetic representation of itself within the colonized, as an elusive and effective strategy of colonial power and knowledge. Colonial power is forever anxious to create the means of its own economic, political and cultural persistence.¹⁷¹ While such mimicry produces ‘the colonial’ as a stable signifier of power and presence, Bhabha argues that it is here itself that the foundation of that stability is upset. Macaulay’s Indian interpreters are ‘authorized versions of otherness’ for Bhabha, that function as “part-objects of a metonymy of colonial desire, [and] end up emerging as inappropriate colonial subjects [who now produce] a partial vision of the colonizer’s presence.”¹⁷² Crucially, colonial power is thus also threatened by the uncontrollable ‘menace’ of these representations. So these inappropriate objects serve to destabilize colonial subjectivity, to decenter its authority.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁹ *Manjuben Truckdriver* (2002)

¹⁷⁰ Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse” in *The Location of Culture*, New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 121- 131.

¹⁷¹ Macaulay’s program to educate a class of people who were to be Indian by origin, but would come to possess British ‘tastes, opinions, morals and intellect,’ is one example of such controlling mechanics of the colonial.

¹⁷² Bhabha (1994), p.126

¹⁷³ To quote at some length, “In mimicry, the representation of identity and meaning is rearticulated along the axis of metonymy. As Lacan reminds us, mimicry is like camouflage, not a harmonization of repression of difference, but a form of resemblance, that differs from or defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically. Its threat, I would add, comes from the prodigious and strategic production of conflictual,

The perceived threat of masculinity in ‘women’ or within the female body is somewhat similar. Imagined only in terms of a copy of an original presence, a more ‘real’ masculinity, mainstream feminism produces female masculinity as a metonymic representation of such a normative masculinity. In order to render this inappropriate/menace masculinity intelligible and hence controllable, it is repeatedly read within expected codes of gender signification, much like the part-objects of the metonymy of colonial desire that Bhabha describes. Manjuben also admits after all, that when she’s confronted with unruly masculinity she replicates it. However, here is also where the rupture in this circle of resemblance occurs. In its status as ‘almost, but not quite’ masculine, female masculinity can be seen to become the inappropriate subject of normative gender signification, in that it ‘splits’ under the gaze of the normative into “freak,” ‘failed lesbian,’ “sexist,” “copy,” and of course ‘failed woman’ and ‘failed man,’ only to reveal the “phobic myth of the undifferentiated whole” gendered body.¹⁷⁴ Paradoxically, it is this fracturing and splitting of the gender nonconforming body that most resembles the feebleness of north Indian Hindu masculine hegemony, as discussed in the previous chapter, in that it lacks a stable presence from where power and authority may consistently issue.¹⁷⁵ In the case of North Indian female masculinity, the resemblance to the fractured self of North Indian male masculinity is even more stark, as the latter itself, as argued in Chapter 1 is a mimetic representation (“an almost but not

fantastic, discriminatory ‘identity effects’ in the play of a power that is elusive because it hides no essence, no ‘itself’. And that form of resemblance is the most terrifying thing to behold.” (Bhabha p.128)

¹⁷⁴ Bhabha (1994), p. 131

¹⁷⁵ Discussed in Anne McClintock’s *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995), Luce Irigaray’s concept of gender mimicry very much echoes Bhabha’s argument in the way in which Irigaray denaturalizes and renders instable, the (heterosexual) norm. Irigaray suggests that women learn to stage femininity and heterosexuality as masquerade and an ironic mimicry, as a survival strategy in a world structured by male desire and perceived supremacy (McClintock, 62). Within this gender mimicry, the connection between sex and gender is denaturalized.

white”) of the masculinity of the colonizer-other.¹⁷⁶ Manjuben’s replication of the unruly behavior of other male truck drivers on the highway, while mimicking male aggression, is precisely the kind of menace that Bhabha conceives of. Whether insisting on aggressively passing all trucks on the highway, or divorcing her ex-husband, or exerting her authority over her male co-workers, Manjuben’s resemblance to masculine power does little to prop naturalized male-manhood. If anything Manjuben seems to be overly cautious to maintain her distance from what she deems as harmful masculinity (unlike other men on the road, she avoids professional indiscretions like drunken driving, and seems to have little patience for paternalistic masculinity), and seems all too aware of her masculinity as a *performance* of certain expected gendered roles and attunements (the way she performs her role as efficient taskmaster, her cinematic poses for her yearly calendar photographs, her assertion of herself as the breadwinner of the house). And yet, even as she embodies a menacing mimicry of masculinity, there is still a collectivity that is experienced and expressed in the labor of driving long hours along familiar circuits repeatedly with her male coworkers. Thus, without arguing for a new enunciation or taxonomy of masculinity, my suggestion is that female masculinity must be read outside recognizable heterosexist assumptions, such that, rather than attempting to determine if and how much masculinity a person is guilty of perpetrating, we view masculinity itself

¹⁷⁶ While I want to bring together Irigaray’s idea of gender mimicry (see above footnote) together with Bhabha’s concept of colonial ambivalence and mimicry to bear upon my reading of female masculinity in postcolonial India, there are also limits to how one can read female masculinity through the lens of mimicry. Following McClintock, I would be mindful of how an engagement with female masculinity only through mimicry might result in an abstractions and a “fetishism of form” (63) at the exclusion of messier historical change, political economy and social activism – which inflect subjectivation and processes of gendering.

as having been put under erasure, both within the uncertainty of gender nonconformity and within the indeterminacy of working-class experiences in liberalizing India.

The process of unraveling masculinity and femininity from their naturalized positions in the cultural imagination has already been undertaken within postcolonial studies. As noted in Chapter 1, gender has been a very crucial epistemological lens for postcolonial inquiry into the processes by which a productive and governable citizenry is reproduced in India. And yet the social contractarian terms on which postcolonial and globalized gendered citizen-subjects are produced are those that have always, and will remain, stacked against them when viewed through the prism of class hierarchies and labor practices in globalization. Gender signification in globalizing India must always then be a process of mimicry that embroils even the most legible masculine (read cisgender male) subject in structures that alienate him. So what then can one make of non conforming genders, like female masculinity? I have tried in this section to resuscitate the possibilities of this structural fracturing and contradictions within masculine subjectivity. That is to say, it is within the gaps and fissures of the double mimicry of postcolonial gendering that female masculinity becomes a productive epistemic site. Like Bhabha's inappropriate (colonial) subjects, masculinity when reconfigured by a performed notion of gender and identity, exposes the entire system of gender signification to the specters of its violence, its other, and its own radical uncertainty.

I have reviewed above how masculine gnc might negotiate gendered expectations and contend with a forever unresolved in-between of dichotomous understandings of male and female, masculine and feminine, dominant and subversive gender performances, original and copy genders, and perpetrator and victim of gendered

violence. However, it is unsustainable to view gender relations in isolation. One cannot hope to produce a theory of gender that eschews intersectionality or does not account for the particular ways in which gender emerges as a social relation differently in different contexts. A contextual reading of female masculinity makes it possible to view gender nonconformity as one aspect of the complex and dynamic interplay between class, religion, caste, community, region, and nation in India, rather than a singular, essential factor determining identity. This is no small theoretical matter. To be sure, the subject of the LGBT rights movement in India is one that lays claim to the unmarked category of middle- to upper-class, upper-caste, urban gays and lesbians, whose identity and political mobilizations cohere around remedying the state repression of “alternative sexualities.”¹⁷⁷ In order for the LGBT movement to be more inclusive and expansive, rather than a single-issue one, a consideration of intersectionality is imperative. In the next section, I will review some of the recent debates around the usefulness of intersectionality (both in the US and in India) as a concept that helps understand the experience and management of difference within neoliberalism, and then offer female masculinity as a way to complicate some of the ways in which intersectionality has come to be used in academic and activist spaces recently.

Female Masculinity and Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a core concept in feminist theorizations of difference. It emerged more than two decades ago as a way to critique the separation of gender and

¹⁷⁷ I borrow the term “alternative sexualities” from a recent episode of popular talk show, “Satyamev Jayate” hosted by renowned Bollywood actor Amir Khan, screened on October 19th, 2014 on Star World channel. The episode discussed the experiences of LGBT people, and brought on parents and medical experts to share their insights about LGBT lives and identities.

race in anti-discrimination law in the US. Its foundational theorist, Kimberle Crenshaw argued that the law collapses the category of gender into white womanhood and that of race into black manhood, thereby obscuring the experience of women of color. If the women's movement was a struggle for sovereignty and autonomy for woman as a category, it had become such that this autonomy was only meant to be accessed by white middle class women, contended Crenshaw. Thus she worked to reformulate identity politics and intervene in the mutually exclusive conception of gender and race especially within the legal system.¹⁷⁸ Crucially, Crenshaw developed intersectionality as a concept that was posited against a politics of inclusion, forcefully arguing that “these problems of exclusion cannot be solved simply by adding Black women within an already established analytical structure.”¹⁷⁹ In theory, Crenshaw argued for an understanding of identity politics that rendered all identities as foundationally intersectional and thus unstable. While in its conception intersectionality is a very effective means to illuminate and focus on the subordination of women of color experiences within feminism, its deployment in feminist activism as well as in women's studies classrooms has perhaps not been as successful. The limits of intersectionality as a concept have been eloquently articulated in recent years by scholars such as Wendy Brown, Jasbir Puar and Diane Detournay.¹⁸⁰ Two points that have been brought up by these critiques are particularly compelling. First, as

¹⁷⁸ Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color", in: *Stanford Law Review*, 1991, No. 6, pp. 1241–1299.

¹⁷⁹ Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics", in: *The University of Chicago Legal Forum Volume: Feminism in the Law: Theory, Practice and Criticism*, 1989, pp. 140.

¹⁸⁰ Wendy Brown, "Suffering Rights as Paradoxes." *Constellations* 7 (2) New York City: The New School, 2000, 208-229; Jasbir Puar, "'I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess' – Intersectionality, Assemblage, and Affective Politics", European Institute for Progressive Cultural Politics, Web: Jan, 2011, http://eipcp.net/transversal/0811/puar/en/#_ftn3; Diane Detournay, "The Encounter Between Feminism and Liberalism: An Itinerary of "Woman", Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2013.

Puar argues, conceived as a concept that considers its starting point the elision of black women's experience from feminist work, intersectionality in its deployment if not intent, has, paradoxically, rendered women of color as the perennial Other against whose emancipation feminism must measure its success.¹⁸¹ Puar states, "In this usage, intersectionality always produces an Other, and that Other is always a Woman Of Color (WOC), who must invariably be shown to be resistant, subversive, or articulating a grievance." In the context of India, a similar risk is undertaken by Dalit feminism, in that while intersectionality has been an extremely useful rubric through which to articulate the intersections of gender, caste, and multiple patriarchies, the academic deployment of intersectionality often renders Dalit women as an abject Other who are either entirely elided or whose subaltern voice is lost within the interpretive paradigms of liberal Brahminism and Western knowledge production.

Multiple scenes in the film are concertedly focused on Manjuben's investment in Hinduism and Gujarati Hindu culture. Her office, home and truck are all bedecked with idols of prominent Hindu goddesses like Durga, Shakti, and Lakshmi. The relationship between Manjuben and her retinue of goddesses is not merely one of unquestioning religious faith. It is a more complicated ideological negotiation between Manjuben and Hindu iconography, one that she uses to theorize and legitimize her own gender formation. This intimacy between religious conservatism and gender/sexual non-conformity has been explored in Paola Bacchetta's work on Hindu nationalist women. Hindu religious fundamentalism or Hindutva is a fast growing organized political and moral force in India, especially in the state of Gujarat, which relies heavily on the

¹⁸¹ Puar (2011)

masculinization of the public sphere and bases its theory of the Hindu nation on a deeply gender normative conception of society and Hindu culture. The role ascribed to women is one that is subordinate to men, of a figure that symbolizes the nation but is not an equal citizen of it. Paola Bacchetta takes a closer look at Hindu nationalist women to understand the stakes involved in their participation in a nationalist project that ostensibly marginalizes them without apology. She argues against mainstream Indian feminist portrayal of nationalist women as naïve followers or victims of fundamentalist men. In fact, she contends, that often nationalist women appropriate and exercise “agency,” while negotiating uneven and contradictory “spatialities” – of body, street, city, nation. In her study of the women's wing of the RSS, Bacchetta determines that in fact while negotiating the disparate physical and ideological spaces of the street and the city, nationalist women frame Hindu mythology within feminist rhetoric in order to reconfigure public space and fashion a politics of women's empowerment against male violence. Manjuben's is one such deployment of Hindu mythology.

The seductive power of such icons of militant femininity, for masculine women perhaps needs further comment. The contingent and adaptive nature of the Hindutva rhetoric when dispersed over multiple spaces and scales, makes possible various identificatory and disidentificatory practices for a variety of populations. For many Hindu women, Hindutva affords them a space to effect the rejection of traditional codes of gendered behavior, while also maintaining a sense of moral and cultural community which has to defend itself from degenerate others (Muslims, lower castes, lower classes) in order to prosper and succeed. For Manjuben, Hindu iconography not only grants her

the tools to talk about her independence and empowerment, but also helps her articulate her female masculinity and psychological androgyny.

Thus, having become the condition for the intelligibility of Manjuben's gender, hegemonic Hinduism becomes inextricable from queerness. What I am pointing to is not merely the intersections between religion and queerness, but instead, to the complex ways in which dominance and marginality are co-constitutive. Thus Manjuben renders mainstream LGBTQ rhetoric of emancipation rather suspect, as she falls outside the binaries of tradition and modernity, margin and center. She also exhibits the fallacy of pitting the Indian State against the margin or minority resistance, and forces us to examine the complicities among those spheres. An acknowledgement of these messy ideological entanglements of the queer is particularly productive. It reveals the importance of how Indian feminism and queer studies should be inseparable from postcolonial theorizations of the fragmented/ incomplete modernities that complicate the political and affective landscape of the nation.

While conducting some preliminary research during the summer of 2008 in New Delhi, I was invited to celebrate Rakshabandhan (Rakhi)¹⁸² with the "*bhai log*" ("brothers") by a group of masculine women friends. Deeply implicated in an aggressive patriarchal model of community formation (the fraternity), this 'brotherhood' of masculine women had been facing tremendous criticism from other (non-masculine) lesbian-identified women for possibly fragmenting the lesbian "community" along the

¹⁸² Raksha Bandhan translated as the bond or promise of protection in a number of Indian languages. It is an upper-caste Hindu festival that celebrates the relationship between brothers and sisters. The sister ties a holy thread (rakhi) on the brother's wrist. In turn the brother vows to protect and look after his sister.

lines of gender. Nevertheless, the “bhais” were making an effort to further strengthen their “brotherly” bond as they appropriated the rituals of the Hindu festival Rakshabandhan as a way to signify lasting ties of responsibility and love towards one another, especially in the face of what they felt was unwarranted criticism and misunderstandings about them within the extended LGBTQ circles in the city. A few of them brought along with them rakhis that they said they picked up from the kids section. These had little plastic super-hero toys mounted on the string itself. However, far from infantilizing the wearer, these superhero rakhis functioned as tokens of reverence and gratitude as they invariably landed up on the wrists of some of the older “brothers” who are viewed as mentors and leaders within this group of self-identified “butches” and transgender (TG) guys.

As much as it is fortunate, it is also striking that female masculinities, as opposed to a variety of male born gender variations like those of kothis, panthis, hijras, double-deckers etc, have not been taxonomized by sexuality-centered NGO initiatives. HIV/AIDS funding projects that are fueled by corporations in the West¹⁸³ have engendered a deeper inquiry into male homosexuality/gender variance as well as sex work. Scholars like Ashley Tellis have noted that the categories of kothi, panthi, etc. are the effect and construction of these funded enterprises that serve to pathologize and medicalize male homosexual behavior, for the purposes of AIDS disease management,

¹⁸³ Naz Foundation International (receives funding from HivOS, Netherlands, Ford Foundation, USAID etc.); Humsafar Trust, Bombay (funding from USAID, Family Health Intl., HivOS Netherlands etc); SAATHII (Solidarity and Action Against The HIV Infection in India; funded by WHO, UNDP, UNAIDS, John M Lloyd Foundation etc) to name a few.

and more so for the management of public sexuality.¹⁸⁴ The absence of such an administrative necessity together with the threat that women's sexual “deviance” is said to pose to the societal order has left women's gender and sexuality largely silenced. No Indian, local categorizations of female queer expressions have found currency or popularity among large sections of society to the extent to which their male counterparts have. Over the years, words have been invented in order to speak of women's alternate sexualities; by no means has this nomenclature reflected queer female genders. Thus to bring female masculinity into being through discourse necessarily requires borrowing and appropriating Western (English language) identities for Indian/local formations. The words 'butch' and TG¹⁸⁵ (transgender) are only just about finding acceptance within queer communities in metropolitan cities. Bearing this in mind however, it becomes increasingly difficult to counter the charge that lesbian/female same-sex love is a Western import. Within popular LGBTQ as well as mainstream feminist discourse, the masculinity of women is immediately subjected to a double othering, both on account of gender (masculinity in any form is looked upon as powerful and threatening) and on account of its alleged foreignness. The divide between “local” and “Western” queer expressions thus, also becomes one that maps onto and separates feminine and masculine queer gender respectively. The use of English words to describe one's sexuality and more so gender, is also a clear marker of class, thereby creating a new divide between women who recognize their gender as one that contains elements of femininity and masculinity ('butch') and others who, in the absence of that term, have learned to articulate their

¹⁸⁴ Tellis, Ashley; “The Revolution Will Not Be Funded”; Himal Southasian(himalmag.com); March 2008

¹⁸⁵ The term TG or transgender refers to masculine identified female bodied individuals who are either post-operative or are on their way to getting surgery. It is also an identity that assumes opposite gender desire.

masculinity in heterosexual/ist language. These non-English speaking and largely non-metropolitan, lower-class and lower-caste female masculinities, are thus more susceptible to being read as existing within a mimetic and pathological relationship with patriarchal paradigms, than upper-class English speaking masculine modalities. Mainstream feminism, as well as metropolitan 'queer' politics, imagines these modalities as regressive and, in a way, an undoing of the work of feminist and queer thinkers over the past couple of decades. This linear progress narrative within feminist awakening and politics is brought down more heavily on masculine women, while more feminine women who choose to be in relationships with masculine women are readily appropriated as the subjects of emancipation from the sexism and potential violence attributed to masculine women. How does the valuation of certain identities and subjectivities take place? What makes for a viable citizen, or indeed a viable subject of emancipation into citizenship?

One such nebulous node of intimacy between mainstream conservatism and the supposed marginality of gender-benders appears in Paola Bacchetta's work on Hindu nationalist women.¹⁸⁶ Religious fundamentalism in the form of Hindutva is a constantly growing organized political and moral force in India, which relies heavily on the masculinization of the public sphere and bases its theory of the Hindu nation on a deeply gender normative conception of society and Hindu culture. As noted above, the role ascribed to women is one that is subordinate to men, of a figure that symbolizes the nation but is not an equal citizen of it. Paola Bacchetta takes a closer look at Hindu nationalist women to understand the stakes involved in their participation in a nationalist

¹⁸⁶ Paola Bacchetta. "Hindu Nationalist Women Imagine Spatialities/Imagine Themselves: Reflections on Gender-Supplemental-Agency." *Right Wing Women: From Conservatives to Extremists Around the World*. Paola Bacchetta and Margaret Power. New York: Routledge, 2002

project that ostensibly marginalizes them without apology. Bacchetta argues against mainstream Indian feminist portrayal of nationalist women as blind followers of fundamentalist men, or even as their victims. She seeks to study the ways in which nationalist women appropriate and exercise “agency,” while negotiating the contradictions that various “spatialities” (body, street, city, nation) bring with them. In her study of the women's wing of the RSS, Bacchetta determines that in fact while negotiating the uneven spaces of the street and the city, nationalist women use Hindu mythology to adopt feminist rhetoric in order to reconfigure the use of public space and also in order to fashion a politics of women's empowerment against male violence.

Bacchetta makes a somewhat counterintuitive but persuasive claim that Hindu nationalist women can surely be “feminist,” but also that feminist women can indeed be right wing. She attributes this possibility to the contradictory and ever shifting spatialities over which nationalist women's projects operate. The provisional/contingent and adaptive nature of the Hindutva rhetoric when dispersed over multiple spaces and scales, make possible various identificatory and “disidentificatory” practices for a whole range of people.¹⁸⁷ Queer women are also not immune to the appeal of Hindu supremacy, especially as it is conceptualized by nationalist women. They strive for a rejection of traditional (Hindu and Muslim) codes of gendered behavior, while also maintaining a sense of moral and cultural community which has to defend itself from degenerate others (Muslims, lower castes, lower classes) in order to prosper and succeed. The militaristic, austere and publicly influential figures of nationalist women leaders have indeed created an interest and a potential iconography, especially for masculine queer women. The

¹⁸⁷ José E. Muñoz, 1999.

seductive power of such icons of militant femininity for masculine women perhaps needs further comment. Public figures like Kiran Bedi (retired IPS officer, BJP supporter) and Aarti Mehra (former BJP Mayor of New Delhi) have been identified as independent, strong and mannish in their demeanor and are some of the only figures who are identified within queer circles as possibly queer, among political leaders across the board. Their militant Hindu nationalism does not remain a mere coincidence for many upper caste Hindu queer women. Yet should militant femininity be considered coeval with queer female masculinity? How can one determine the limits of either? One thing seems to be clear, however, and that is that seemingly oppositional discourses or bodies can be seen to be susceptible to each other due to the fact of historical, discursive, emotional, material proximity. Further, in this case, the identificatory slippage between nationalist masculine women and queer female masculinity mentioned above, seems to insert a simultaneous indeterminacy into any stable conception of female masculinity as a separate and radical social formation, at the same time as this slippage introduces uncertainty into conceptions of postcolonial Indian femininity.

The obscuration of (female) gender inversion consists of the estrangement of queerly gendered 'women' from the dominant conservative mainstream, the upper-caste feminist mainstream and the upper-class/upper-caste queer mainstream. The feminist and indeed, the dominant "lesbian" construction of the "butch-femme" dynamic in North India, runs parallel with any heteronormative coupling. The masculine individual in the couple is attributed the same privilege (economic freedom, freedom to access and inhabit the public sphere, etc.) that upper-caste patriarchal men are said to possess. The feminine queer woman/ the femme, due to her ostensible gender intelligibility (and also

thus the virtual invisibility of her queerness), in a butch-femme relationship is considered a victim of the butch's sexism. Within Delhi's feminist/ "progressive" queer circle common sense, the 'femme' thus becomes the easy subject of empowerment, the locus of political theorizations and action, the one to whom solidarity and sisterhood is extended, for she is legible as properly feminine and easily constructed as victim. The masculine woman, or the 'butch', to advisedly appropriate an Anglo-American term, poses the threat of unintelligibility, of difference within difference and indeed of a notion of power that is always already attributed to masculinity.

This ascription of power to female masculinity is, more often than not, tied to the charge of imitating or reproducing patriarchal and sexist behaviors. With this perception, any (female) masculine expression becomes both an active disavowal of femininity and a desire to "be a man," and thus a disavowal of any political critique of patriarchy. Here the threat of female masculinity is read as, and in the process collapsed into, the threat of dominant masculinity. In reading all types of female masculinities as imitations of a singular notion of dominant (upper-caste male) masculinity, contemporary feminism thus remains trapped within the scope of upper-caste patriarchal masculinity and acts to reify that masculinity as the norm. To place the performance as well as the reading of masculinity within this closed circle of gendered signification albeit derivative and mimetic, signals an inability to imagine gender as anything outside of the stable, all-encompassing polarity of masculine and feminine. Indeed, the naming of "female masculinity" might also contribute to closing this system of signification. The question however, remains: what is threatening about 'female masculinity' to feminist conceptions of an empowered femininity? Further, what are the implications of the mainstream

feminist and queer (in addition, of course, to mainstream homophobic society) interpretation of female masculinity as being anti-feminist and as a failed 'lesbian' formation, respectively, due to its allegedly derivative relationship with normative patriarchy?

Dalit (untouchable and lower caste) feminists have pointed to a space on the margins of hegemonic upper-caste constructions of patriarchy, where a different set of stakes are involved in the daily articulations of masculinity and femininity, and thus where the anxieties and instabilities within upper-caste gender roles are exposed. I will attempt to supplement the Dalit feminist argument with an exploration of the processes through which 'female masculinity' comes to be regarded as a threat to masculinity, but more importantly to an empowered femininity, by postcolonial feminists.

The intersections between feminist and queer political rhetoric and Hindu supremacy find new life in the ways in which feminism and queer politics imagine masculinity and patriarchy, in the process of fashioning and articulating a political agenda against it. Mainstream savarna (caste Hindu) feminism has been critiqued extensively by Dalit (untouchable) feminist scholars for restricting their cultural, gender and economic analysis to upper caste nationalist and militarist masculinity. For Dalit feminists, bourgeois Hindu masculinity is not their sole adversary; mainstream feminism itself is also to be contended with as a dominant discourse as well. Dalit feminist Sharmila Rege has noted that even left-wing feminists, while agreeing that a materialist framework was central to any analysis of women's oppression, drew theoretical

commonalities only across class but not caste or community.¹⁸⁸ Such a political bias was also evident in the major campaigns launched by the savarna feminists in the 1980s, which only dealt with upper caste issues like dowry, rape, violence, treatment of widows, rather than deploying an analytical framework, which following Dalit theorists like Jyotirao Phule and Bhimrao Ambedkar, treated caste hierarchies and patriarchies as intrinsically linked.

In her introduction to *Gender and Caste* (2003) editor Anupama Rao argues that in order to understand the specific trajectories and forms that sexual and gendered oppression, “we must understand the multiple and changing manifestations of caste in Indian society”. (Rao, 5) To speak of heteronormativity in India, is then to speak simultaneously of upper-caste normativities and hierarchies. Denaturalizing and contextualizing mainstream upper-caste, middle class heteropatriarchy then on the anvil of caste, might produce alternative narratives and surprising allies for the non-normatively gendered. This is not to say that Dalit patriarchy and masculinity are a self-conscious space of resistance or subversion. Indeed Dalit feminist scholarship is engaged precisely in naming and challenging Dalit heteropatriarchy. However, Dalit scholarship offers us a position that is historically delegitimized and stigmatized, and opens up for question the fundamental categories of analysis that are intrinsic to upper-caste patriarchy. For instance, Kancha Iliiah¹⁸⁹ asserts that the silence enveloping sexuality, especially female sexuality in Indian society is an upper-caste phenomenon.

¹⁸⁸ Rege, Sharmila. “A Dalit Feminist Standpoint” in *Gender and Caste* Anupama Rao (ed) Kali For Women, New Delhi. 2003 pp. 90-101

¹⁸⁹ Kancha Iliiah. “Why I am Not a Hindu” in *Gender and Caste* Anupama Rao (ed) Kali For Women, New Delhi. 2003.

He claims that in lower-caste or among untouchable communities there is a matter of fact approach to sexual gratification and reproduction. Thus, a degree of frankness about sexuality that might be coded as unfeminine (read masculine) in upper-caste society is also associated with a caste and class based norm of femininity. Similarly, Iliah as well as Leela Dube¹⁹⁰ argue that matters of spirituality, honor and power are not linked to female sexuality in the substantive ways that they are in Hindu upper-caste culture. Where upper-caste sexuality is caught up within Hindu iconography and produces particular tropes of femininity, Dalit sexuality is more “secular” and “democratic,” (Iliah, 88) that is to say, egalitarian.¹⁹¹ Further, Dube asserts, gender roles for Dalits are less polarized, as both men and women are compelled to be units of production and labor both within the familial structure as well as according to caste-determined social roles. The upper-caste anxiety for endogamy (arising from ideas of “purity” of the upper-castes), produces women and femininity in particular, as sites that are to be protected, contained and restrained, notes Dube. This anxiety is absent within Dalit patriarchy due to the shared burden of what is socially considered “impure” and untouchable forming the core of Dalit identity and professions.¹⁹² Again, here we can see how, in its invariable ascription of power and privilege to masculine queer women and always coding feminine queer women as the only deserving subjects of feminist action, upper-caste feminists fail to read for alternate modalities of gendering. An important corollary of this insight would also be that lower class (working/laboring) and

¹⁹⁰ Leela Dube. “Caste and Gender” in *Gender and Caste* Anupama Rao (ed) Kali For Women, New Delhi. 2003.

¹⁹¹ “[Dalit woman] does not have to address her husband in the way she would address a superior.” (Iliah, 88).

¹⁹² Dalits or “untouchables” occupy the lowest rung of Hindu social hierarchy, where their untouchability is inherited by birth and rigidly fixes them within certain professions (like garbage picking, sewage cleaning, scavenging etc) that are considered impure and unclean – both physically and spiritually. (Dube, [2003])

lower caste women are always already “masculine” within upper-caste notions of gender, as they do not conform to upper-caste, bourgeois constructions of femininity.

To re-state an earlier point though, I have gone into a somewhat detailed description of the differences between Dalit patriarchy and savarna patriarchy, not to recuperate the former as a site which produces subversive gender roles due to its sheer marginality. Indeed, critic Gopal Guru argues that Dalit women are doubly oppressed by Brahminical patriarchy and by Dalit patriarchy and to make matters more complicated, that Dalit men end up reproducing the same mechanisms against Dalit women which their “high caste adversaries” had used to dominate them. I go to theorizations of this difference to point out, first, that in India gender *is* caste and caste, gender, and second, that a political mobilization of female masculinity might indeed find better allies and theoretical lineages in the Dalit movement rather than the mainstream feminist and Queer movement. Further, the Dalit movement itself traces its intellectual and political lineage to the Black consciousness movement in the US.¹⁹³ It appears especially apt at this juncture to bring a queer analysis to bear upon and through the Dalit analysis via the ‘queer of color critique’ as articulated in the work of critics Roderick A. Ferguson and José E. Muñoz. I am thus venturing to do what Omise’eke N. Tinsley calls for in her essay *Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage*¹⁹⁴ – that is, while grounding queer Africana studies in the historical and the material, there is also

¹⁹³ Indeed one of the first organized political enunciations of Dalits in India was in 1972 when the Dalit Panther Party (DPP) was established in Bombay. The DPP was indebted to the African-American Black Panther Party not just in name, but also in the way it had begun to understand the status of untouchables in India. Methodological and conceptual connections were drawn by the DPP, between untouchability in India and racial segregation in the US.

¹⁹⁴ Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley. “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage” in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 14: 2/3 Durham: Duke University Press, 2008, pp 191–215.

a need to “navigate [the] field *metaphorically*” (Tinsley, 2008). With the help of Fanon, she argues that metaphors provide the conceptual tools of “becoming” or in understanding and articulating certain subjugated modalities of being. She says, “The territory-less Atlantic also tells us that – black queer studies must speak transnationally.”¹⁹⁵ Thus while mindful of the situatedness of black queer histories and their shifting relationship to power within the US, I want to use certain insights provided by the black queer scholars as “metaphors” through which an epistemological and political mobilization of female masculinity in postcolonial India, can be effected.

Ferguson states¹⁹⁶ that the queer of color critique is an epistemological intervention that “denotes an interest in materiality, but refuses ideologies of transparency and reflection...”¹⁹⁷ To deploy such a critique in the context of female masculinity in India would mean to infuse the materiality and embodiments of female masculinity with meaning, thereby producing them as sites of knowledge, but at the same time refusing an empirical fixing of that knowledge as representation. Integral to this refusal of empiricism and representation is a purposeful distance from “ideologies of discreteness” like nationalism, hegemonic liberalism, and mainstream upper-caste feminism that treat capital, caste, class, gender and sexuality as disconnected.¹⁹⁸ Taking the simultaneity and heterogeneity of the discourses within which female masculinity is embodied into consideration, would also mean unhinging female masculinity from a

¹⁹⁵ She further states that “When black becomes only African American, black queer theory becomes insular; as the crosscurrents between Atlantic and Caribbean, Atlantic and Mediterranean, Atlantic and Indian Ocean are the richest in marine life, so they will be richest in depths of theorizing.” (Tinsley, [2008] p. 212)

¹⁹⁶ Ferguson, Roderick A. *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2004.

¹⁹⁷ Ferguson, 2004, p. 3

¹⁹⁸ Ferguson, 2004, p. 4

notion of identity. It is thus helpful to understand some of the maligned North Indian articulations of female masculinities, in terms of a series of 'disidentificatory' practices and performances. To reiterate, no articulation of gender, and in this context, female masculinity, exists outside of normative significations of gender or sexuality. Neither are masculine women in any way positioned outside of groups and organizations that help organize mainstream political efforts. It is my endeavor to move towards an understanding of female masculinity (and through it, of femininity and masculinity) as not identities or fully formed subject positions, from which certain peculiar gendered enunciations and embodiments issue forth, but instead as practices, that are compelled by, negotiated through and sometimes fashioned against the normative.

José E. Muñoz's concept of disidentification as an everyday reconfiguring and revaluing of elements within the dominant discourse, in order to privilege/channel certain energies over others, hence simultaneously emphasizing and subverting dominant formations, can be harnessed to formulate such an understanding queer female masculinity in North India. The practice of disidentification then, imagines new ways of living, but only on the basis of the old. In other words, it is not a set of practices that claims to be wholly oppositional to the dominant discourse, neither is it contained within it. Neither does its strategies of understanding and representing emanate from taking the good while discarding the bad. Rather, disidentificatory practices seek to recycle in a challenging or questioning vein what is oppressive, while maintaining the existence of that which is being called into question by investing it with new energy¹⁹⁹. This becomes clearer if one returns once again to the example of the celebration of Rakshabandhan

¹⁹⁹ Muñoz, 1999 p. 12

among masculine women and TG friends in Delhi. As noted earlier, this group came under criticism for organizing such an event on account of what was perceived to be a divisive political action within the “lesbian community” in Delhi. The charge was that masculine women and TGs are trying to form their fraternity-like community which is not only against the binding efforts of other lesbians in Delhi, but also a deeply problematic form of community rooted in heteromascularity. But this is where such easy readings of this move towards community formation are interrupted by the disidentificatory nature of (female) masculine interaction. Conventionally, the gender roles of brother-protector, sister-protected are fixed in this ceremony. The appropriation and enactment of this ritual of tying a rakhi by and on other masculine women, was thus a playful but poignant act that doubly gendered each participant as masculine *and* feminine, protector and protected. The upper-caste patriarchal values enshrined in this ritual are already upset by the queer actors in the ceremony. Further, while deeply invested in the symbolism of the rakhi as a protective bond, the participants of this ritual are not unaware of the patriarchal structure within which the ritual emerged and took hold. This rather emotional process of (en/re-) gendering kinship between masculine women is actively caricatured by them as well, as many took special care to buy rakhis that were in the shapes of little plastic superheroes (like He-man and Superman). These superhero-rakhis gesture to the inherently performative nature of the gendered power relations that are symbolized by such a ceremony. They become overdetermined elements of this gendered ritual (Rakshabandhan) that simultaneously reinforce masculinity even as they caricatured it by signaling its artificiality and its construction

within a larger economy of material²⁰⁰ and ideological consumption. It is such a multilayered practice that Muñoz terms the disidentificatory negotiation between ‘desire, identification and ideology.’²⁰¹

It is in these self-conscious performances of identity that one can observe a decanting of the signifiers of masculinity of their sexism and assumed power. Further, if as Bacchetta suggests, one is attentive to the provisional and contingent nature of these articulations of *masculinities*, unevenly scattered over varying spatialities, then perhaps an intervention in the conflictual discourse between female masculinities and feminist analyses of patriarchy can be achieved.

²⁰⁰ For a fuller discussion of postcolonial masculinities and commodity culture (that would also enrich an understanding of the existence of the super-hero rakhis), see Sanjay Srivastava’s “The Masculinity of Dislocation: Commodities, the Metropolis, and the Sex-Clinics of Delhi and Mumbai”. In it he argues that in a postcolonial context, commodities are “both objects and processes of culture” (193) rather than mere fetishes. Different commodities are “singularized” and ascribed different values which can be decoded only when studied in the messiness of varied rubrics like ‘tradition’, ‘modernity’, ‘the province’, ‘the metropolis’, ‘class’ etc. Further, he argues that in postcolonial economies, objects are not always in contradistinction to persons, rather they might be created out of persons (“objects as personifications”). Further, he argues, “This is also the interface between the emerging culture of globalization and the attempt to define the local: an unstable equilibrium where commodity culture is good, but only if reshaped according to a different –‘traditional’-consumption pattern than that in the West being promoted by the forces of globalization.”

²⁰¹ Muñoz, 1999, p. 18

Chapter 3

Queer Fixations: Milan Singh, Falguni Pathak and the Imbrications of Queer and Nation

Milan Singh and Falguni Pathak are two visibly gender nonconforming, masculine women in the Indian popular music industry who came to fame during the period between the 1980s and 1990s respectively. Both performers appear in front of audiences, as well as off stage/camera, dressed in unambiguously masculine attire, have resolutely short masculine haircuts, remain unmarried and romantically unassociated with male or masculine people. While Milan Singh's unique talent is her ability to sing as convincingly in a "male" voice as in a "female" voice, Pathak's voice is decidedly feminine. Unlike most other well-known female singers of their time, Pathak and Singh are not playback singers,²⁰² meaning that their voices and corporeal presence would *both* be witnessed by their audiences. Both singers were popular among regional and national audiences at a time when the terms "gay," "lesbian" or "transgender" were not part of the mainstream Indian middle class vocabulary and social imaginary. So the simple question that propels this chapter is: how did Milan Singh and Falguni Pathak get away with their all too public performance of female masculinity? How, in other words, did two such improperly gendered bodies succeed in gaining and maintaining fame among myriad

²⁰² Playback singing is a popular technique used in Bollywood cinema where professional singers pre-record songs that are then utilized as soundtracks and diegetic music for the films, and lip-synced by the actors on screen. The singer him/herself never appears on screen.

audiences without any recourse to LGBT rights rhetoric or public consciousness? In an academic moment marked by filling archival absences and reconfiguring queer failure, what could studying the success of these two gender non-conforming people reveal about queer methodologies that work with a model of archival scarcity, rather than abundance?



Image 1 Milan Singh singing Mohammad Rafi's Nazar Na Lag Jaye Kisi Ki Raahon Mein for DD New Year's Eve Program, 1989 Doordarshan. Screenshot retrieved from Doordarshan/Prasar Bharti archives

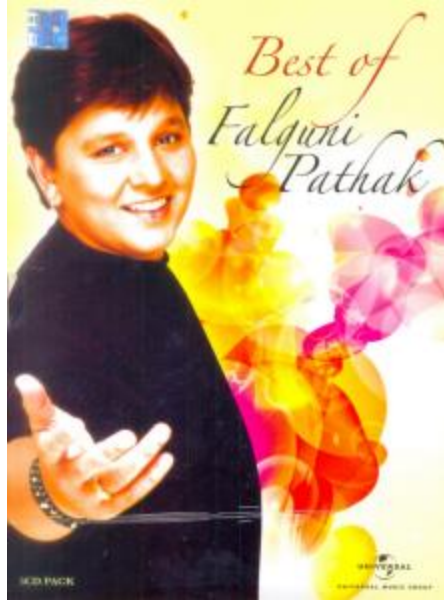


Image 2 :Falguni Pathak, on the cover of *Best of Falguni Pathak*, a retrospective cassette of her music

In India, the emergence of LGBT politics, or what can be called the queer movement, in the late 1980s and 90s, coincided with the liberalization of the Indian economy. The fact that LGBT political action has most often taken the shape of legal contestations against repressive laws, HIV/AIDS prevention through changing governmental health policies, and interventions in the politics of development is deeply linked to the rise of neoliberalism, NGOization of grassroots politics, and transnational modernizing agendas in India. Naisargi Dave (2012) asserts that within anthropological accounts of non-Western lesbian and gay sexuality, instead of focusing only on alterity of non-Western behavioral and identificatory practices, there has been a recent shift toward “understanding culture as an inherently translocal process and seeing globalization as an incitement to both sameness and difference.”²⁰³ Yet a division persists in which the West is seen as the site of the politicization of sexuality, while the non-West remains the site of

²⁰³ Naisargi Dave, *Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2012 (2012) p. 15

a “private struggles over identity formation or the negotiation of queer desire with local moralities.”²⁰⁴ This formulation positions the question of sexuality and sexual subjectivities in the non-West as a matter of the reconciliation of sexuality with culture, religion and nation, rather than that of the politics of identity.²⁰⁵ Dave asserts that the tendency of scholars to construct those identities and subjectivities that fall outside LGBT political and social movements in the non-West as warranting closer analytical attention, deepens what she thinks is a preoccupation in this literature with the everyday, and by extension, the culture-politics divide. In this chapter (and in the larger dissertation) I aim to bridge this divide by analyzing representational practices that range from depicting the everyday to the performed and televised. The politics of representation of nonconforming subjectivities, and contestations over identity for masculine women and transgender men in particular, serve to tie elements of cultural specificity (if not alterity) with the politics of identification. So in asking the question, “how do Milan Singh and Falguni Pathak get away with their public performance of female masculinity?” I am not only interested in studying how they negotiate the (in)commensurabilities of their nonconforming gender identifications with local culture and moralities, but also for the ways in which an analysis of their on- and off-stage performances can be instructive for a different formulation of LGBT politics in India.

The cultural work performed by these pop artists during the first phases of liberalization in India provides a unique vantage point into the multiple fragmented identifications that mediate gender nonconformity and state power variously, and

²⁰⁴ Dave (2012) p.15

²⁰⁵ Dave (2012) p 16

illuminate the mutually constitutive relationship between postcolonial nationalism, global capital and unconventional gender/sexual identities and practices. As part of the transnational turn within LGBTQ anthropological, literary and cultural studies, which emphasizes phenomena such as migration, exile, travel and trade routes, and has helped theorize globalization as a study of mobility, cosmopolitanism and diaspora, there has been a shift away from the nation-state. Such scholarship has helped conceive of culture not as a bounded object but a continual and dynamic process of relationality that has aided a productive reconfiguration of culture. This chapter concerns itself with questions about space, place and difference raised within queer transnational and globalization studies, while re-centering the nation as a viable and crucial site upon which political, economic and affective relations are established, and stresses those subjectivities that elaborate and express themselves through the nation and nationalism. I examine the queer gender- and artistic performances of Milan Singh and Falguni Pathak for the ways in which they enable an epistemology of queer fixations, a dwelling on and within the nation that upset the orderly discourses of gender, globalization and LGBT marginality in India, and urge us to take the conviviality between the nation and queer bodies seriously.

Queer Fixation and Fixity

Theoretically, staying put is not seen as a transformative practice. In a globalized world, the movement of bodies and objects has been thoroughly configured as signifying material and psychological growth, while stasis is equated with stagnation. By traveling overseas, objects are seen to accrue value as commodities to be sold in foreign markets, and laboring bodies find redemption by sending home remittances, and acquiring cultural

and/or legal citizenship. Within transnational imaginings, geographic mobility is brandished as a promise of upward class mobility, even as the reality of class, caste and race based exploitation remains unchanged if not worsened for most im/migrants. Transnational and queer diaspora studies have undertaken a much more critical uptake of the politics of transnational mobility, by showing that movement, in our colonized and globalized world brings with it a sense of radical placelessness and challenges us to rethink the relationship between space and belonging. When belonging and identity is found outside the bounds of nation/home/place, one can appreciate the porousness of nationalist hegemonic discourse. As queer immigrants, refugees, migrant labor, and those queers who are exiled create livable habitats outside of conventional notions of “home,” we see the emergence of a queer cartography of resistance – one that locates the potential of rupturing and reconfiguring hegemonic nationalism outside of the nation, in diaspora, in exile and in mobility.²⁰⁶

This chapter attempts to re-center the conversation to those gender/sexually nonconforming bodies that cannot, or refuse to, move beyond the nation. In this turn to the nation I do not seek to resolve the tension within globalization studies on whether the contemporary moment is one that has moved beyond the nation into a globalized and deterritorialized multitude between which capital and culture circulate, or one that is

²⁰⁶ For example, see Gopinath (2005) for a recasting of diaspora as the site for the emergence of oppositional practices and subjectivities otherwise rendered impossible within the nation and its repressive ideology of cultural authenticity and reproduction. And Fajardo (2008) for a reclamation of transnational capital flows and trade routes as “contact zones” that queer conventional narratives of seafaring Filipino heteromascularity and nationalism. While Gopinath seems to decant the space of the nation from queer possibility (as in her formulation, “queerness is to heterosexuality as the diaspora is to the nation” (11); Fajardo’s does not privilege diaspora over nation, but instead teases out the (gender and class) proximities between queer and hegemonic nationalist masculinities within the context of transnational labor and mobility.

marked by the persistence of statist hegemonies and their preponderance in local lives. Instead, the chapter presents the need to take seriously precisely the unresolved nature of this conflict in the lives of those that are marked as different. That is to say, that I am interested in the contradictory and fraught relationship between the queer and the nation, where each disavows the other and yet lends itself to the stabilization of the other. The resolved and perpetually contentious nature of this relationship is what I term a queer fixation on the nation. Thus, this chapter becomes an opportunity to set one's gaze on the mutually reinforcing abilities of the nation as well as its marginal citizens to redistribute power and reorganize their yearnings in globalization, without giving into the anxiety to move on to the next stage of political development. To be thus fixated on the nation is to render it as the object-choice on and through which queer desire may be enacted at the intersection of gender, sexuality and class.

In psychoanalytical terms, fixation denotes the incompleteness of one's psychosexual development in which one may stay "stuck" on one's attachment to an object-choice connected to an earlier stage of development. Freud proposes that within the process of early psychosexual development, the ultimate goal of "normal" sexuality is heterosexual intercourse achieved by the resolution of the Oedipal complex and the subordination of all the component sexual instincts to "the primacy of the genital zone."²⁰⁷ If however, one persists in one's desire for earlier sexual objects such as mouth or anus, it becomes a "fixation" that presents an obstacle to heterosexual satisfaction. Within LGBT politics the goal of "normal" political development is to attain recognition

²⁰⁷ Sigmund Freud. *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, Translated from German by James Strachey; edited by Angela Richards, London: Penguin, 1991.

from the juridical state – as evidenced by the emphasis placed by the LGBT movement in India on the repeal of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. And so, while the desire for the state and the institution of law is regarded as that which constitutes the proper subject of the LGBT movement, attachments to the nation as an affective container are construed as oppositional to a “progressive” political agenda. I deploy the term “fixation” to bring attention to how imbrications with the nation then might, in fact, interrupt LGBT temporality and political directionalities in India, remain illegible to the state as well as to LGBT politics, and thereby open up a different way of conceiving the political – one that accounts for the realities of those who cannot or choose not to access the state.

The invocation of nation here signifies both a bounded spatiality, administered and securitized as distinct in relation to the circuits of global mobility, but much more importantly, a significant hegemonic force through which queer identities are willed and articulated at the intersections of class, caste, religion, language and place. In discussions of gender/sexually nonconforming bodies and their relationship to power, a disruption of the scalar and spatial binarisms of local/global (as discussed in the Introduction) necessitates also the question of, in Aniruddha Dutta’s words, the “temporalities of power.”²⁰⁸ Dutta contends that within histories of sexualities and sexual subjectification, there is often a reification of colonial notions of development and teleological progress, even as some of them might rely on narratives of historical rupture and others on evidences of continuity. For example, Dutta argues, that although critical of such teleological narratives, even works such as those of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze

²⁰⁸ Aniruddha Dutta. Dissertation: University of Minnesota, “Globalizing Through the Vernacular: Gender/sexual Transnationalism and the Making of Sexual Minorities in Eastern India”, 2013.

can be seen to revert to series of chronological moments of rupture and supersession in eighteenth-century Europe that engendered a dispersion of governmental power throughout society in the form of governmentality, new technologies of governance to manage populations and ensure the perpetuation of life in the form of biopolitics, and the resultant emergence of “sexuality” as a defining component of personhood.²⁰⁹ A more intersectional approach which takes into account the nonlinear congealment, diffusion, and modulation of power, and is particularly useful to understand the ways in which masculine women, transmen and other gender nonconforming formations in India enact and embody their attachment to/within nationalism, is Jasbir Puar’s work on assemblages and homonationalism.

Puar seeks to flesh out “convivial relations between distinct yet entangled forms of power, part and parcel of what can be named ‘environmentality,’ rather than ‘governmentality,’ of mutually reinforcing, rather than teleological or serial, habitations of discipline and control, regulations and regularities.”²¹⁰ She explains that “unlike power that banishes and excludes, or includes and organizes and manages, this power operates through calculation and intervention, characterized by tendencies and degrees, adjusted through tweaking and modulation rather than norming.”²¹¹ While there is a sense here of an uneven, nonlinear modality of power that takes into account discrete and contingent spatio-temporal logics, there remains a tension within Puar’s theorizations between such a model of power and her definition of homonationalism. In her description of

²⁰⁹ Dutta (2013) p.48

²¹⁰ Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2008, p. 117

²¹¹ Puar (2008) p. 116

homonationalism, she urges us to consider nationalism as not only “productive and supportive of heteronormativity” but also propagating “sexualities that mimic, parallel, contradict or resist this normativity.” Explaining that homonationalism is an effect of US exceptionalism, she argues, “the production of gay and queer bodies is crucial to the deployment of nationalism, in so far as these perverse bodies reiterate heterosexuality as the norm but also because certain domesticated homosexual bodies provide ammunition to reinforce nationalist projects.”²¹² I quote Puar here to demonstrate how, in this formulation, queer lives and subjectivities may only deploy nationalism in order to attain similitude with normativity, rather than embrace more fully their own difference. In other words, while Puar’s homonationalism is influential for my project in conceptualizing trajectories of power, resistance, and representation in relation to the nation, it nevertheless renders unintelligible the lives of those whose ability to embody and inhabit their queer *difference* from hetero-, class and caste based normativities derives from their complex imbrication with nationalist projects. Milan Singh and Falguni Pathak are two figures in Indian pop culture that compel a rethinking of LGBT politics from such a position of unintelligibility, and that complicate or halt linear directionalities of power, normativity and nonconformity that are evidenced in the LGBT movement’s desire for state recognition.

Part of the desire for the state has entailed the primacy of narratives of visibility by “coming out” of the proverbial closet into the public sphere.²¹³ The linear movement

²¹² Puar (2008) p. 39

²¹³ A quick look at online portals such as <http://gaysifamily.com/tag/coming-out/>, <http://orinam.net/resources-for/lgbt/coming-out-2/>, LGBT listservs, reveal that LGBT politics of identity in India are foregrounded in these modalities of recognition and visibility.

from (homo)sexual repression to liberation, invisibility to visibility has not only garnered Foucauldian critiques of ahistoricism but also brought on a host of dissenting voices that have pointed out that the ability to be visible via coming out is often available only to elite, metropolitan homosexual subgroups.²¹⁴ Another obvious concern is that “coming out” is not a politically viable act for most gender non-conforming people, because gender in different ways than sexuality, is an embodied performance that breaks spatial and epistemological distinctions between public and private.²¹⁵ Falguni Pathak and Milan Singh are two such people who present us with an opportunity to think about those who never “come out” and identify as gay/lesbian/bisexual or queer, but are nevertheless always visible as gender/sexually different. Do we merely understand this as an effect of the easy-to-spot quality of gender nonconformity, or is there, in this staying put in the closet, a different version of the political that the LGBT movement in India tends to neglect or all too quickly dismiss as out of step with modern rights-based politics? In this chapter I attempt to account for such fixed queer political formations – not to proliferate a notion of plurality or alternative modernity that merely modifies an original conception of modernity by infusing it with local color. Instead, I seek to challenge the construction of a singular narrative of LGBT political history and the representation of it as such.

Timothy Mitchell delves deeper into the interconnectedness of modernity and representation and makes the claim that “modernity is not so much a stage of history, but

²¹⁴ See LABIA. *Breaking the Binary: Understanding concerns and realities of queer persons assigned gender female at birth across a spectrum of lived gender identities* Bombay: LABIA, 2012 and Sunil Mohan assisted by Sumathi Murthy, *Towards Gender Inclusivity: A Study on Contemporary Concerns around Gender*. (ed) Alok Vaid-Menon with a foreword by Kalpana Kannabiran, Bangalore: Alternative Law Forum and LesBiT. 2013.

²¹⁵ This is especially significant as the most publicized and successful argument against Article 377 that criminalizes sodomy in India, has been the right to privacy of sex acts committed between two consenting adults.

rather its staging.”²¹⁶ Through a discussion of the politics of voice and performance in Falguni Pathak and the framing and representation of Milan Singh on national television, I elucidate and account for the ways in which, during liberalization and the rise of Hindu nationalism, artists such as Singh and Pathak were able to simultaneously sustain popularity among mainstream regional and national (Hindu) audiences, and queer subcultural groups. The distinct ways in which they negotiated and shaped their own reception help track the socio-political and affective transmogrification of the modern Indian public sphere from the late 1980s to the early 2000s. Of interest to me are the divergent ways in which the question of difference and identity of the proper Indian citizen are co-opted, reconciled or elided within the mutating discourses that comprise Indian nationalism during these two decades. By analyzing selected footage of Milan Singh’s performances on state-sponsored national television channel, Doordarshan,²¹⁷ I observe that Milan Singh’s performance is understood and presented as a site of exceptionality and difference that is absorbed into the foundational tenet of “unity in diversity” in the postcolonial production of the Indian citizen. On the other hand, Falguni Pathak, who garnered fame through the satellite television and youth culture boom, embodies the explicit injunction of sameness and Hindu majoritarianism within liberalized Hindu nationalism that seeks to expunge difference from the Hindu national body, or at the very least demote its legitimacy below Hindu identity. An analysis of these performances further elucidate Mitchell’s assertion that,

²¹⁶ See Timothy Mitchell, “The Stage of Modernity,” in *Questions of Modernity*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2000, p. 23

²¹⁷ A state sponsored television channel that held the monopoly on television broadcasting in the 1980s, before the advent of satellite television.

Modernity, like capitalism, is defined by its claim to universality, to a uniqueness, unity, and universality that represent the end (in every sense) of history. Yet this always remains an impossible unity, an incomplete universal. Each staging of the modern must be to arranged to produce the unified, global history of modernity, yet each *requires* [emphasis mine] those forms of difference that introduce the possibility of a discrepancy, that return to undermine its unity and identity. Modernity then becomes the unsuitable yet unavoidable name for all these discrepant histories.²¹⁸

Nationalism in the time of Liberalization

I turn now to the cultural and political impact of the liberalization of Indian media, the shifting role of the state in relation to broadcast television and the rise of Hindu nationalism. Arvind Rajagopal has observed that in the context of economic liberalization, the resurgence of Hindu nationalism was dependent on how the media reshaped the way politics was envisioned, enacted and understood.²¹⁹ In other words, the emergence of Hindu nationalism signals a coming together of market reforms and the diversification of communications towards fashioning a Hindu public. Where Congress-led Nehruvian developmentalism operated as a hierarchical, top-down flow of political power, capital, and knowledge, market reforms enabled Hindu nationalists to offer Hindutva as a populist discourse outside of the formal political sphere.²²⁰ Economic liberalization and an insurgent mediatized Hindu cultural politics were not causally linked processes, but they did go hand in hand and worked through one another to express a need for a change in the status quo. Hindu nationalists offered a range of affective identifications and commoditized images of Hindutva that incited popular participation without needing political power. That is to say, that Hindu nationalism was

²¹⁸ Mitchell (2000) p.24

²¹⁹ Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics After Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India* 2001.

²²⁰ Rajagopal (2001) p.17

not merely a reactionary movement located at the margins of public discourse; it first simulated and then successfully garnered popular consent, becoming the dominant interpretive framework, that articulating nothing short of national identity and national culture was at stake.²²¹

In post-independence India, the material and theoretical *raison d'être* of electronic media was the state, functioning as a totalizing ideological state apparatus that positioned itself pedagogically vis à vis the national population. Habermas' concept of "the public sphere" as distinct from the state and official market relations, and as the sphere in which a conscious democratic dialogue about public concerns takes place, leaves something to be desired when explaining the particular trajectories of politicization of the Indian public(s).²²² In India, Rajagopal contends, "media were introduced before the rationalization of politics and the "disenchantment' of society" and sought to construct a national identity while bridging the gap between the educated elite and mass audiences."²²³ Both Rajagopal and television scholar Satish Poduval (1999) show that the arrival of satellite television in India resulted in a loosening of state control and brought

²²¹ Madhava Prasad defines "national culture" as a term that refers "to the set of cultural practices involving the production of meaning and pleasure whose presence and effectivity is overdetermined by the existence of a poitically defined national space. Thus national culture is not defined here in advance as consisting of a set of "values", "traditions" and "heritages", a fixed quantity of things whose fortunes against a foreign onslaught can then be measures accurately. This latter is the cultural nationalist approach [*or what I would call "nationalism"*]. In our definition, national culture is a term whose content is necessarily changing, consisting as it does in the ongoing debates and contestations over meaning in the national space, whether those debates concern India's ancient heritage or the effects and consequences of television and the Internet. It is in so far as the political autonomy of the national space determines these debates and gives them a distinct character that these become part of a national culture". "Television and the National Culture" in *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, no. 32-33 New Delhi: Tulika Press, April 1999 p.124

²²² Rajagopal (2001) p.7

²²³ Rajagopal (2001) p.7

broadcasting under the influence of new market forces during liberalization.²²⁴ Along with the array of satellite televisual programming that exposed Indian audiences to the global youth culture of MTV, came fears of cultural imperialism and the destruction of Indian values by consumerism. However, the unprecedented growth of Indian television in the mid-to-late 1990s, and the successful “indigenization” of programming (Star TV faced competition from Zee TV, and MTV was countered by Channel V) seemed to prove the Indian public’s resistance to cultural invasion and change. Madhava Prasad argues that the point of contention was no longer culture itself, “so much as a struggle between competing foreign and indigenous capitals.”²²⁵ Calling India a “multinational state,” Prasad points to the success of regional privately-owned channels like Asianet, Sun TV, Eenadu, and the ways in which they operate as national and even “quasi-state” television, as a caution against any conceptual separation of state and market, such as in Habermas’ concept of the public.

Strategies of indigenization and Indianization of consumer culture and of commodities themselves are put in service of producing meanings of the global through the idiom of the (Indian) nation. Without the onerous constraints of Nehruvian austerity, popular participation within national culture (by middle and lower, urban and rural, educated and uneducated classes) was made through individual acts of consumption, and religious nationalism became one of the most important sites for its articulation in the time of liberalization. Rajagopal, Prasad, and Poduval provide detailed accounts of how

²²⁴ Satish Poduwal, “The Possible Histories of Indian Television”, *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, no. 32-33 New Delhi: Tulika Press, April 1999, pp. 111

²²⁵ Madhava Prasad, “Television and the National Culture”, *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, no. 32-33 (April 1999) pp. 119–129)

serialized Hindu mythological programming (for example, the serial epics *Ramayan* (1987-1988) and *Mahabharat* (1988–1990),²²⁶ galvanized a national culture and consciousness for a multiply split national population, through television. In this moment of the birth of a fledgling collective consciousness, the BJP saw an opportunity to garner political will and consent. Among other multifarious and complex reasons, it was the yoking of a collective nostalgia for the bygone precolonial tradition, as seen in the *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat*, with a definitively Hindu mass movement that promised India's prideful entry into a globalized future through consumption that led to the Ram Janmabhumi movement. So where earlier, within the Nehruvian framework, the call for the national integration of disparate and separate cultural realms was articulated as the need for "unity in diversity," the BJP revamped the question of national integration into one of the political mobilization and assertion of collective Hindu identity.

The rise of Hindu nationalism as the dominant context of representation and meaning making was a process that involved a proliferation of commodity images and Hindu symbolism in the public sphere, indeed a proliferation of Hindu symbolism *as* commodity images, the consumption of which ensured Hindu cultural citizenship.²²⁷ The Ram Janmabhumi movement consolidated some of these strategies of the

²²⁶ Other contemporary nationalist programming included the series *The Sword of Tipu Sultan* (1990–91) and *Param Vir Chakra* (late 1980s)

²²⁷ To be sure, in the two decades following the liberalization of the Indian economy, and most conclusively with the recent emergence of the BJP as the victorious political party in the 16th Lok Sabha Elections in India (2014), participation in Hindutva consumer culture is no longer a matter merely of cultural citizenship, but one of political citizenship as well. Reports of arrests made against civilians using social media for political dissent, the censorship of media deemed anti-Hindu and thus anti-national, the re-naming of ministry portfolios to reflect Hindu national identity (such as the renaming of the "Ministry of Water Resources" to the ministry of "Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation") already abound within two weeks from the declaration of BJP leader Narendra Modi as Prime Minister of India. Rajagopal, (2001) pp. 66-67

commodification of ritual objects for mass consumption. Ritual objects were extracted from their traditional contexts and placed for purchase by the pilgrims en route to the Ram Janmabhumi, for example, buttons, stickers, saffron armbands, small pots of holy water etc. These items were not meant for worship, but instead for a public display of cultural and political affiliation with Hindutva or what Rajagopal calls “political Hindus,” and found extensive coverage in the media during the Ram Janmabhumi sojourn, both within print media and on television.²²⁸ This comingling of aesthetics and politics was dubbed, within Hindu nationalism, as an opportunity for self-expression, a self which was already constructed as oppressed and othered within the national secular imaginary and thus needed empowerment within the public realm of representation. I study the representation of Milan Singh and Falguni Pathak, two artists that enjoyed public attention between late-1980s to early-2000s to interrogate how Hindu nationalism was rendered mundane and absorbed within popular culture. Tracing the double iconicity of both female artists within nationalist/regionalist audiences, as well as within LGBTQ audiences imagined at the margins of citizenship, supports my larger aim of demonstrating how those two categories are not mutually exclusive. Further, in the following section I demonstrate how the (self-) representations of female masculinity and female-masculine subjectivity, although garnering some audiences that may hold progressive and anti-nationalist affiliations, are not resistant to hegemonic nationalist culture a priori. In fact, Hindu nationalism and gender non-normativity can often be seen to stabilize themselves within representations of each/the other.

²²⁸ Rajagopal, (2001) pp. 66-67

Milan Singh and the Management of Difference

The dual nature of the artists' performances – audio and visual – refracts each of their personas and performances through a set of multi-layered reading conventions, with roots in Bollywood filmic customs, recent MTV music video styles, and more traditional stage performances and shows. Each must navigate and adapt to the complexities of audience expectations within the fast changing landscape of mass media through the moment of liberalization, burgeoning global youth culture, and the rise of Hindu nationalism, in order to leave a lasting mark on the music industry. This, one might appreciate, would be an especially monumental task given that both artists embody nonconforming/female masculinities – Milan Singh, who challenges the biological determinism of the feminine voice, and Falguni Pathak, who unabashedly complicates acceptable media practices of representing female desire.

I begin with Milan Singh, a North Indian singer who rose to regional fame in the mid-1980s, a few years before the effects of market reforms started to bear fruit for the entertainment industry. Most popular among working and middle class audiences from Punjab, UP, Haryana and Delhi, Singh was primarily a regional touring concert artist, who went on to secure appearances on Doordarshan in the early 90s. Her career was interrupted by a near fatal motorcycle accident. But it is the period right before her accident, when Singh was at the peak of her career and was making regular appearances on Doordarshan that is most pertinent to my argument. In 1989, Singh was briefly featured on the annual New Year's Eve program as one of many singers, actors and performers that Doordarshan showcased within a loosely structured skit. The skit

involved two male characters (one, a political contender in the fictitious upcoming elections, and the other his associate) conversing about the state of the nation and its global standing. The showcased artists and performers strung together by the skit are never introduced by name; instead they are rendered as character-tropes or textual evidence within the two hosts' debate²²⁹ about what the future of the country entails.

In it, Milan Singh's performance is declared a felicitous fallout and evidence of the culmination of the women's liberation movement in India. Citing the women's movement as proof of India's march into postcolonial modernity, the skit traces the legacy of the women's movement to nationalist freedom fighters, specifically the Queen of Jhansi, Rani Lakshmibai, a renowned hero of the Revolt of 1857. The visual and discursive rupture caused by Milan Singh compels the script writers of the show to discipline and incorporate her improper masculinity within the nationalist logic of this politically themed TV skit. It is apparent that the autonomy exerted by Milan Singh's performance of masculinity is seen as threatening, and therefore, perhaps, a direct result of the perceived anti-establishment and anti-male stance of the women's movement of the 1980s. Doordarshan's expedient method of neutralizing the threat of gender non-normativity in this instance, as in many others, was through enacting a pedagogy of nationalism. In this case, Doordarshan provides its viewers a way to understand Milan Singh's gender embodiment by positioning her within the same discursive continuum as the iconic nationalist figure of the Queen of Jhansi, in a larger narrative of the inevitable subservience of strong, unconventional women to the Indian nation. Arvind Rajagopal

²²⁹ "New Year Eve Programme", *Doordarshan Archival Footage*. Doordarshan, New Delhi: Doordarshan Archives, 1989, Television.

argues that the “mission of the Nehruvian state had absorbed all questions of politics into itself, so that the decision before voters was reduced to choosing which party was most fit to carry the task of development forward.”²³⁰ Recasting the oddity of Milan Singh’s masculinity and the undesirability of her (misrecognized) feminism as seamlessly fitting into the state’s allegedly pre-existing plan for women’s equality, made Milan Singh living proof of the democratic and modernizing potential of the Nehruvian developmental state and its slogan of “unity in diversity.”

For anti-colonial nationalists, especially Nehru, national unity or national integration was a foundational value that the new Indian nation-state was to uphold. Nehru shared the colonial belief that the reason for India’s susceptibility to colonial domination was the dividedness of Indian society and the lack of a centralized governing structure. Modernization, in Nehru’s central goal and vision for the postcolonial Indian nation-state, hinged on a reconciliation of regional desires for sovereignty by a central government that held everything together and was given unwavering loyalty. From an anti-colonial assertion, “unity in diversity” became a postcolonial assumption of a fundamental unity that is resilient and exceptionally pliable when confronted with diversity. Papori Bora explains, “When [...] confronted with diversity, nationalism’s response is to propose a structure, with a limited set of headings like religion, race and language, within which this diversity can be classified, and showing how, in the final count, these differences can all be synthesized.”²³¹ It is this assertion of the ability to

²³⁰ Rajagopal, Arvind. *Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

²³¹ Papori Bora, “The Nation and its Margins: Reading Gender and the Politics of Sovereignty in India’s Northeast”, Dissertation. University of Minnesota, 2011, p. 271

overcome difference that is then produced as evidence of the inherent unity of the Indian nation. Within this system of classification and reconciliation of difference, Milan Singh's gender non-conformity emerges as a problem as it cannot be easily explained within the existing taxonomy of "admissible differences."²³² Thus, within this Doordarshan skit on the theme of the future of Indian democracy, Milan Singh's performance becomes an important space for the staging of this contestation between the nation, its proper citizenry, and its outliers. Through the strategic conjoining of Singh's female-masculinity with the emancipation of women, and further, the co-optation of the women's rights movement into the project of modernization by the Nehruvian state, the state is declared victorious and the unity of the nation is reinstated.

In another of Milan Singh's feature-length presentations, shortly after the abovementioned Doordarshan appearance, she is introduced by a different program host. This time, the host cannot escape naming the featured artist, but she nevertheless deftly avoids pinpointing Milan Singh's indeterminable gender by abruptly switching from unavoidably gendered Hindi to a more gender-neutral English, mid-way through her introduction. Furthermore, instead of describing the artist's career accomplishments or discography, the host introduces Singh as a "miracle of nature" for her ability to sing in both male and female registers, thus materializing Singh first and foremost, as a signifier of difference. While the linguistic shift from Hindi to English makes sure not to (mis)gender Singh, it also fixes Singh in a place of being otherwise. Singh's fans and audiences also navigate her gender illegibility by fetishizing and commodifying her "dual

²³² Bora (2011) p. 271

voice” and discussions on online forums reveal that there is widespread confusion about Singh’s gender, with her fans often wondering in disbelief, “is it a girl??”²³³

The shock and mystery of the singer’s gender nonconformity is (re)solved by collapsing Singh’s off-stage masculine gender presentation into her on-stage persona and her “unique” talent of singing in a “dual voice.”²³⁴ One online commenter goes as far as to call her a “novelty item,”²³⁵ positioning her firmly as the exception to the rule of properly gendered objects, an out of place body and performance that is nevertheless valuable for that very difference. Sara Ahmed uses Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism to “demonstrate the links between representation and broader relationships of production”²³⁶ of difference as part of what she calls “stranger fetishism.”²³⁷ She offers a model for understanding the ontology of strangers as socially constructed, and proposes that “we can only avoid stranger fetishism ...by examining the social relationships that are concealed by this very fetishism...[W]e need to consider how the stranger is an effect of processes of inclusion and exclusion.”²³⁸ Ahmed emphasizes that rather than understanding the stranger as an entity we do not know, we would do better to remember that strangers are recognized *as such* due to their existing alongside us, and part of the familiar world. The fixation on Singh’s strangeness and the subsequent cooptation of her body and performance within logics of unity, incorporation and inclusion within the new postcolonial Indian nation, was in line with the broader strategy of Nehruvian pre-

²³³ Paramveer Singh, “Re: Milan Singh – singer with art of singing in dual voice”, December 23, 2009, Web. January 31, 2012 www.punjabiportal.com/forum/milan-singh-singer-dual-voice-t1748.html

²³⁴ Singh (2009).

²³⁵ Suharsh, “Re: Penn Masala: A cappella Band”, December 23, 2007, Web. January 31, 2012. <http://www.bollywoodtorrents.me/threads/122599-Penn-Masala-Acaapela-Band>

²³⁶ Suharsh (2012) p. 61

²³⁷ Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, Routledge: London, 2000, p. 6

²³⁸ Ahmed (2000) p. 6

liberalization nationalist discourse to assign a place to the stranger. In Ahmed's words, "[t]he stranger has a place by being "out of place" at home"²³⁹ and this proximity is differently managed within nationalist discourse depending on the sort of threat the particular kind of strangeness is seen to pose to the notion of community, tradition and nation.

The paradox of the familiar stranger is useful in re-examining the dichotomous configurations of gay-straight, and resistance-hegemony. It urges us to conceive of a politics of gender and sexuality that is attentive to the epistemological proximities and the concatenated embodiments of these categories in the dominant Indian, upper-caste Hindu discourse. In this context, while co-opting the women's movement and supplementing its iconography with Hindu nationalist freedom fighters, Doordarshan, as the widely acknowledged propaganda machine of the Congress government and the crucial vehicle of development, also *created* the conditions suitable for the appearance of Milan Singh's nonconforming female masculinity. Far from coincidental, the invocation of the Queen of Jhansi, who is lauded within nationalist discourse for her ardent patriotism and, importantly, for her masculine prowess on the battlefield (as evidenced in the famous lines by poet Subhadra Kumari Chauhan, "khoob ladi mardani, who toh Jhansi wali Rani thi"),²⁴⁰ precisely articulates and renders legible Milan Singh's own female masculinity.²⁴¹ During the New Year's Eve program, the office seeker tells his associate,

²³⁹ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2006, p. 141.

²⁴⁰ My translation from Hindi original: "Oh how gallantly she fought, like a man; She was the Queen of Jhansi"

²⁴¹ The legend of Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi varies within nationalist and regionalist discourses. While she is readily applauded as a brave and patriotic queen, an icon within Hindu nationalism, different qualities of hers are memorialized in different political contexts. In *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India*:

“I was also meaning to say - one should inspire women to become equal to men. Understood? Women’s lib! I want to make them into the Queen of Jhansi!” To which the associate (played by renowned actor Om Puri) responds, “We’ll make them the *King* of Jhansi, sir! We will continue the tradition of the call for women’s liberation (*naari mukti*) from Rafi to Lata, and from Kananbala to K.L. Saigal.”²⁴² In response to the politician’s exhortations to emancipate Indian women by emulating the Queen of Jhansi, Om Puri boasts of *exceeding* that goal by uplifting women to the stature of *king* (of Jhansi). In this dialogue and in nationalist commonsense, the Queen of Jhansi functions as a metaphor for “masculine” traits such as patriotism and valor that are considered incorporable into notions of Hindu upper-caste femininity and women’s equality. In Om Puri’s boastful retort however, it is the metonymic use of “king” that immediately signals and materializes Milan Singh’s *embodied* masculinity (her masculine self-presentation and ability to sing in a male voice) and legitimates its existence within the skit’s narrative of women’s emancipation within the modern Indian nation.

Culture, Identity and Politics (2006) Badri Narayan explains that in Western Uttar Pradesh there are many upper caste celebrations of the martyrs of the Revolt of 1857 organized by the BJP and RSS, with Rani Lakshmibai featuring prominently. Simultaneously, in lower caste communities, the legend of Jhalkaribai (who finds little to no mention within stories of Rani Lakshmibai even though some historical accounts identify her as a maid servant of Rani Lakshmibai’s who belonged to the lower caste Kori community and was also a hero in the Revolt of 1857) is celebrated, and is organized by the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). The BJP celebrations of Rani Lakshmibai focus on her feminine qualities like beauty, self-sacrifice and sense of family honor; all traits considered ideal for upper caste women, and highlighted by the BJP in its electoral campaigns while suppressing her masculine qualities that are commonly remembered through Chauhan’s poem. On the other hand, the BSP in its turn, de-emphasized Jhalkaribai’s feminine traits and highlighted her strength, valor and chivalry as evidence of the power of Dalit women heroes, and community at large. So while Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi is a contentious figure within regional politics, her iconic status was often invoked as an example of patriotism, valor and even masculine power.

²⁴² This is my translation from the Braj Bhasha original. In original: “Hum toh yeh bhi kahit rahe ki mahilaon ki purushon ke barabar mein aaye ki prerna do, samjha ki nahi? Women’s lib! Jhansi ki Rani banne ke chahi”. Om Puri responds, “Jhansi ka *Raja-o* banaye dein maalik. Naari mukti ke tarane ki rejwa, hum Lata se Rafi tak, aur Kananbala se K.L Saigal tak pahunchaaye dein”.

This moment of visibility (not just in the sense of being seen, but indeed as being recognized, or made legible) in one's unconventional gender performance due to the invocation of a nationalist icon and proximity with bodies that are considered at home and in place, derives its force from exposing the labor of the encounter between nationalism, market relations, democratic self-expression and regimes of representation. Doordarshan's New Year's Eve skit involving Milan Singh is not only a staging of the reconciliation of gender nonconformity with nationalism, but also the interface of consumption and nationalism. After all, following Rajagopal's argument, the two hosts are engaged in the labor of innovating, packaging and selling as televised commodity, India's future as a modernized nation. They work to weave together a narrative that confers a moment of spatio-temporal pause, a discursive space of dwelling for Milan Singh's "out of place" body and performance in the midst of the multi-directional mobility of the contemporary historical moment. Thus Milan Singh's performance here becomes the "queer object" in the way that Sara Ahmed conceptualizes it, wherein "queer objects support proximity between those who are supposed to live on parallel lines, *as points that should not meet*. A queer object hence makes contact possible."²⁴³

It is such a conception of queerness that can help develop a different idiom in which to talk about queer politics within nationalism; that is, by plowing the fecund field of disorienting possibilities and surprising proximities between nationalism, capital, gender nonconformity and queerness, while also accounting for the bodily and social experience of stoppage, restriction and uncertainty of gender nonconformity in postcolonial India. It might be especially productive to explore how the "parallel lines" of

²⁴³ Ahmed (2006)

nationalism, capital, queer and so on, stabilize and fix themselves in reference to one another, thereby defying the mutually exclusive categorizations of hetero-homo, normative and resistant. The New Year's Eve skit demonstrates the ways in which the project and performance of postcolonial Indian nationalism detains queer bodies and subjectivities by attempting to fix them in time and place. While the skit evokes the future of the Indian democracy and its coming into modernity and development, it can only achieve this by throwing the gender non-conforming figure in rhetorical proximity with a colonial past (through the nationalist trope of Jhansi ki Rani). Simultaneously, the recruitment of Milan Singh and her gender nonconformity for a premature declaration of the success of the women's movement in India becomes a manifest trace of the future-in-the-present. Thus Singh and gender nonconformity in general, become caught up and detained in an impossible push-pull of the contradictions and uneven discursive investments of Indian nationalism and modernization. And yet it is this place of pausing and being held up that Milan Singh's performance embodies that allows us to reflect upon the movements and directionalities that constitute postcolonial modernity in India, therein yielding a critical vantage point that emerge from a fixation on nationalism.

In this next section I will read the ways in which Falguni Pathak provides us with a way to utilize this vantage point in order to rethink our contemporary conceptualizations of LGBTQ politics in India. I will pay attention to the changing landscape of public culture during the moment of liberalization and globalization in India in the early 1990s and the co-emergence of Hindu Right alongside middle-class youth culture. The material and discursive convergences between these two audiences are important to consider for a fuller understanding of the changes within gendered

discourses of Indian nationalism, beginning in the 90s. Carrying forward my interrogation of the question of difference and its treatment within nationalist discourse under globalization, this section will demonstrate some crucial shifts away from the discursive invocations of “unity in diversity”, and complicate simplistic narratives of inclusion, exclusion and cultural citizenship.

Media Practices, Nostalgia and the Politics of Voice

With the rhetoric of Nehruvian developmentalism receding from the public sphere, nationalist discourse veered between a celebration of liberalization and “India Rising” as a global economic power, on the one hand, and concerns over the decline of traditional values and a politicized Indian public, on the other. This dialectic between triumph and anxiety regarding globalization can be seen to have shaped media representation and mass culture of the 90s in a crucial way. The impact of liberalization on the new generation of Indians was a widely discussed topic in newspapers and magazines. While the generation that had grown up in the immediate wake of India’s independence valued socialism, austerity, government service jobs, and the single party government of the Indian National Congress, the new generation grew up in times of fragmented coalition governments, guiltless consumerism, high paying multi-national jobs, and the rise of Hindu nationalism. It became increasingly clear in this context that what was transforming most crucially was the notion of citizenship itself. A new kind of India was being fashioned in which participating and contributing to the nation was not anymore a question of producing goods and services, it had become about the ability and

“freedom to choose” and consume.²⁴⁴ These contestations around economic policies, culture practices, expressions of identity, and configurations of the boundaries of class and caste, were enacted on the backs of young people. The proliferation of beauty pageants, beauty salons, MTV and Channel [V] television channels, global brand clothing etcetera, brought the concerns about the “Westernization” of Indian culture and politics to bear upon the new generation of India in newly gendered ways. Further, in contrast with assertions of deterritorialization of the nation under globalization,²⁴⁵ a consideration of non-elite middle class youth culture reveals how these contestations serve to reterritorialize the nation through gendered expressions of space and place. A close reading of Falguni Pathak’s performance and reception provides a unique point of entry into the reconfigurations of liberalizing nationalism, where young men and women negotiate globalization through consumption practices and regulate national identity via gendered politics.

Gujarati dandiya singer Falguni Pathak made her national TV debut, in 1998. She has carved a sizeable niche for herself with Gujarati as well as national and diasporic audiences in the US and the Middle East. Her tremendous appeal is attributed to her melodious, high-pitched feminine voice, which together with traditional dandiya lyrics and remixed digitized beats has earned her the title of Dandiya Queen. Pathak has also garnered the interest of audiences that are not necessarily invested in dandiya or her talent as a singer, so much as her gender non-conforming masculine self-presentation. Her

²⁴⁴ Satish Deshpande, “Imagined Economies: Styles of Nation-Building in Twentieth Century India”, *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, No. 25-26, New Delhi: Tulika Press, 1993, pp. 5-35

²⁴⁵ Arjun Appadurai. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

music videos have been read as carrying lesbian undertones²⁴⁶ as evidenced by their appearance in queer film festivals and South Asian queer pop-culture websites. It is this double iconicity (as Dandiya Queen as well as gender non-conforming and presumably lesbian celebrity) that is of interest to me, as it productively complicates the impulse to recruit a figure like Pathak as symptomatic of a politics of dissidence, as well as any dismissal of her as too perfectly sutured into the symbolic fiction of the Hindu nation. Her performances are rich and open-ended cultural productions that invite and consolidate disparate spectatorial desires, which in turn successfully interrupt the dichotomous relationship between the normative and the queer and the dominant and the marginal. Thus I turn to her artistic oeuvre to illuminate the meanings and interpretations that slip away from totalizing regimes of “LGBTQ”, “Hindu”, or “Gujarati” identity.

Because Pathak’s vocal talent is so widely lauded, it is worth examining how the singing voice itself might (en)gender postcolonial subjectivities. Wayne Koestenbaum suggests that the singing voice is discursively produced, disciplined, gendered, naturalized and inserted into a moral economy that is inextricably linked to other pervasive discourses of the sexual body or identity²⁴⁷. This becomes clearer in an

²⁴⁶ “What took many years for homosexual men to achieve-social acceptance-took less for Indian females. From voyeuristic newspaper reports of secret lesbian marriages, the openness has moved to another level. Falguni Pathak's video album, *Meri Chunar Udd Udd Jaye*, which sold about five lakh units, caused a heat wave in the lesbian community. The video depicts a young girl confined to the four walls on a visit to her aunt's house. The helpless girl's boring existence ends when she finds a painting of an ethereal damsel, who comes to life and shows her how to let go. Pathak denies any sexual messages in the video, but Lajja Kamath, a collegian who prefers to date girls, says, "Her song inspired me to come out." Sheela Raval. “Seeking Freedom”. *India Today on the Net*. May 14, 2001.

Date accessed: October 14, 2009.

Further, Pathak’s music video “Mera Kajal” is listed and linked on the resource website *Queering Bollywood* (“an exhibition and demonstration of a collection of queer readings in Indian cinema”). Date accessed: October 14, 2009.

²⁴⁷ Koestenbaum, Wayne. “The Queens Throat: Homosexuality and the Art of Singing,” in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss, New York: Routledge, 1991.

interview conducted by C.S. Lakshmi with Carnatic classical singer Aruna Sayeeram who experienced anxiety over her deep voice. Sayeeram narrates, “Compared to others my voice seemed very ‘big’ for me. First of all, it is bordering on a masculine voice...so that was one big disadvantage and...I also felt it was not beautiful to have a thick voice. Many people have also told me this...”²⁴⁸ It is evident here that the singing voice performatively genders the singer. It is significant then that magazine and newspaper articles compared Pathak's voice to the nationally celebrated playback singer Lata Mangeshkar.

In independent India, Lata Mangeshkar developed and instituted a singing voice and style that became the marker of modern Indian ideal femininity. In line with Partha Chatterjee's theorization on the settlement of “the women's question” in modern India,²⁴⁹ as it was mapped onto the dichotomy of home and outside, Sanjay Srivastava asserts that Mangeshkar's stylistic innovation provided a solution to the problem of the representation of women in the public sphere²⁵⁰. He contends that the inner/outer dichotomy of Indian culture posited by Chatterjee got complicated with the increasing popularity of cinema. Women had to now come under the public gaze. Within the Nehruvian period of state-sponsored media production, filmmakers had to employ multiple strategies for the simultaneous exhibition and containment of this exteriorized femininity. The claim

²⁴⁸ Lakshmi, C.S. *Seven Seas & Seven Mountains : Volume 1 : The Singer and the Song — Conversations with Women Musicians*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2000.

²⁴⁹ Chatterjee, Partha and Lata Mani. “Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India” in *Cultural Critique* vol. 7, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998, pp 119-156.

²⁵⁰ Srivastava, Sanjay. “The Masculinity of dis-location: commodities, the metropolis, and the sex clinics of Delhi and Mumbai”, in *South Asian Masculinities: context of change, sites of continuity* (eds) Chopra, R. Osella, C. and Osella, F., New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2004. pp. 175-223.

women began to exert on the public sphere and which otherwise threatened male dominance of those spaces, “was domesticated through the timbre, tonality and stylistic stricture that marked that presence”²⁵¹. The threat of women's bodies in the public sphere was literally “‘thinned’ through the expressive timbre granted to them”²⁵². In this way, calling on the collective memory and resonance of Mangeshkar’s iconic femininity confers legitimacy not only on Pathak's singing ability but also the ability of her improperly gendered body to materialize and be read as feminine. The marketing and commoditization of nostalgia through voice within the Indian music industry in the 1980s and 90s is developed more fully by Shikha

²⁵¹ Srivastava (2004)

²⁵² Srivastava (2004)



Image 3: The Voice of A Nation advertisement by HMV published in Filmfare on October 16, 1987.

Source: National Film Archive of India, Pune; Cited in Jhingan (2013), p. 106.

Jhingan in her work on the advent of cassette technology and the emergence of “copy artists”. The reproduction of iconic voices such as Lata and Mohammed Rafi’s was no small matter. Entire careers of lesser known artists often hinged upon faithful mimicry of the “authentic” timbre and style of these artists, such that an alternate economy of “copy artists” sprouted in the era of the cassette tape. While nation-wide established companies such as HMV would produce original compilations of these artists’ songs, a plethora of “low brow” versions using copy artists and the genre of “tribute” album (shraddhanjali)

was brought out by producers such as Gulshan Kumar (T-Series) and the Tauran brother (TIPS)²⁵³.



Image 4: Cassette Cover - Shradhdhanjali: Mohammad Rafi, compilation album sung by Milan Singh, marketed by TIPS, Bombay, 1988. On the front cover and the spine of the cassette cover, the bigger photograph and font is reserved for Mohammad Rafi – the iconic male playback singer to whom this album is intended as a tribute. The singer of the album is Milan Singh, featured in the smaller photograph and smaller font. Right above Milan Singh’s name are the words: “Kudrat Ka Karishma”, meaning Miracle of Nature. Source: Personal Collection.

Cassettes and later CDs brought together myriad technologies, cultural and audience networks, listening conventions, and reoriented bodies to shape a collective experience of music consumption embedded in the “affective alliance” of nostalgia²⁵⁴. It is this nostalgia for Lata and Rafi’s voices and the nation they recall that produces the fixation

²⁵³ Shikha Jhingan, “Lata Mangeshkar’s Voice in the Age of Cassette Reproduction”, *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*, 2013 4:97-114.

²⁵⁴ Jhingan draws upon Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s conception of assemblage to describe the “movement of experiences through connections and affective alliances.” Jhingan (2013) p. 101

on the voices of junior or copy artists such as Falguni Pathak and Milan Singh. But while Milan Singh's skill of singing in differently gendered registers is fetishized precisely for its irreconcilability with her biological sex (earning her the title of "Miracle of Nature"), Falguni Pathak's voice is consumed as disembodied from or irrespective of the materiality of her unconventional gender performance.

However, Falguni Pathak is not a playback singer like Mangeshkar. She was dubbed the "Dandiya Queen" because of her live stage performances and soon became a recording artist. Singing in Gujarati, Pathak's credibility is firmly rooted in Hindu lower/middle-class culture. There was a proliferation of satellite TV channels that took over airtime and audiences from the state regulated channel Doordarshan. With the aggressive advertising and consumer culture being promoted on the new channels and the advent of youth-focused channels like MTV and Channel [V], television broadcasting was marked by cultural tensions between generations, class, nation and the global²⁵⁵. As a resolution to the threat of cultural erasure under globalization, broadcasters enacted a policy of "Indianization" of youth culture by featuring Indian film songs and videos. Notably, however, this youth culture did not frame itself as a rebellion against the older generation. It was, instead, a re-conceptualization of youth as preservers of Indian family values even as they equipped themselves to be productive and competitive global actors (Juluri, 368). Pathak's rise to fame in the 1990s is in-keeping with this trend that simultaneously counteracted cultural homogenization *as well as* the austerity of the post-independence Nehvurian era.

²⁵⁵ Juluri, Vamsee. "Television and the Invention of Youth Culture in India" *Television & New Media* 3: Sage Publications 2002 367-386.

What's Queer About Falguni Pathak?

Pathak's narrative and stylistic authorship in her videos is instructive. The scenes are often set in interior all-women spaces wherein Pathak is always present as a detached observer, as the star Falguni Pathak herself or as a confidante to the female protagonist, affording herself both the distance of an observer even as she locates herself on the inside of intimate and heavily gendered spaces. In the video, *Yaad Piya ki Aane Lagi* ("I Started to Miss My Lover") a group of school girl friends are shown dressing up and preparing their dance moves for an upcoming concert (which happens to be a Pathak concert within the narrative of the video). The camera weaves in and out of a room belonging to one of the girls, for most of the video. The video is exemplary of how viewers are made aware of our voyeurism by first thwarting our gaze as the women/adolescent girls in the frame shut the door of the room on us, and in then reinstating it in the next shot on the inside of the room, in their private space. This is somewhat the position Pathak herself is in, in each of the videos: always observing and advising, but almost never participating in the collective feminine ritual of dressing up or playing.

It is partly this tension between Pathak's insider/outsider positions in overly feminine scenes that genders her differently from the protagonists of each video-story. This is most noticeable in the video for *Mera Kajal* ("My Kohl") the entire action of which is located inside a palace. Consistent with a few other videos, this one is set in a seemingly feudal past. The interior space invokes a gender-segregated harem-like space. The protagonist is a woman who awaits her male lover, and as she prepares to receive him she sings about the anticipation of his arrival. While the song describes her desire for

her lover, the camera concertedly watches her and her female attendants as they bathe, sing, dance, dress and adorn the protagonist in preparation for her lover. Meanwhile, Pathak, although also located on the inside of this space, is on the margins of the action. She plays no part in bathing or adorning the protagonist; she is positioned off to the side on her own – as narrator, observer and adviser. Unlike the rest of the women who are seen wearing small, midriff-exposing blouses with billowing skirts, Falguni is dressed in a pair of trousers and a collared jacket. Her disconnectedness from the feminine activities together with her masculine self-presentation is immediately noticeable as peculiar, and gender non-conforming.²⁵⁶ It is in this peculiar position of Pathak vis a vis the central protagonists of her narratives that I locate her agency and her subversive power. Judith Butler provides a model of resistance through her concepts of performativity and citationality that I find particularly useful in this context.²⁵⁷ She says, “The process of that sedimentation [of heteronormative identity] or what we might call *materialization* will be a kind of citationality, the acquisition of being through the citing of power, a citing that establishes an originary complicity with power in the formation of the “I”.²⁵⁸ Butler emphatically argues that the instability of the materialization of the body which requires the manic denial of its constitutive other in order to *appear* coherent and stable, is a space full of contestations and gaps that give themselves to an imperfect citation and thus a failed repetition. It is in the gaps between the normative discourse and its imperfect citation that agency resides. My analysis of Falguni Pathak’s performance is guided by such a notion of agency, as something that emerges *from within* the dominant, rather than

²⁵⁶ In fact, a viewer on youtube comments “Can you believe this. I thought she was a dude. I felt really stupid. But she has a nice voice.” SouthGal4ever93, 2008.

²⁵⁷ Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter*. New York: Routledge 1993

²⁵⁸²⁵⁸ Butler (1993) p. 15

wholly against it or outside it. Pathak's persistence within feminine, heterosexist spaces in her videos marks her as feminine within the gendered schema of those narratives, but her imperfect citation of normative femininity ruptures a cooptation of those spaces as heteronormative and invites a disruptive queer identification with the seemingly hegemonic narrative.

Ideological Fixing and Unfixing

Two main thematic strains run through most of Pathak's videos: the anticipation of and culmination in the successful union of the female lead character with her cis-male object of affection; and two, the staging and resolution of the crisis of the liberalized nation – the contestations between tradition and modernity. These themes, while a salient feature of public discourse and Bollywood representations during this time, do not dominate Falguni Pathak's pop-star contemporaries' videos.²⁵⁹ Contemporary pop artists such as Ila Arun, Alisha Chinai, Daler Mehndi and Suneeta Rao's songs were often remixes of popular folk songs in regional languages, and their videos were not always set up as linear narratives staging ideological conflicts. Also noticeable is the treatment of femininity in Ila Arun, Alicia Chinai and Suneeta Rao's videos in that the female leads in the videos – always played by the pop singer themselves – dressed or sang in ways that signified uninhibited sexual playfulness. Thus Pathak occupies a somewhat unique position within this representational landscape, with most of her videos deploying melodramatic tropes from Bollywood, narratives that center ritualized feminine

²⁵⁹ With the notable exceptions of Alisha Chinai's "Made In India (Magnasound:1995) and Ila Arun's "Nigodi Kaisi Jawani Hai" (TIPS: 1994)

friendships rather than heterosexual eroticism, and an aesthetic preoccupation with the traditional.

Her self-appointed role of aid, adviser and confidante of the female protagonist in her videos, is then also a way in which Pathak exerts control over the terms upon which the heteronormative stories in her videos might be understood. She uses the narrative space of the videos to reconfigure gendered spaces and relationships, while also suturing (in the sense of Slavoj Žižek's "point de capiton") them right back into more familiar and normative tropes. "The *point de capiton* is the point through which the subject is 'stitched' to the signifier, and at the same time, the point that hails/interpellates the individual to transform himself into a subject by sending him the call of a master signifier ("Communism", "God", "Freedom"...)"²⁶⁰ These "master signifiers" like the nation and tradition, Žižek explains, might work as 'rigid designators', in that, as signifiers they retain their identity while their signified undergoes all manner of shifting and sliding. The 'rigid designator' thus serves to totalize a given ideological field through the process of ideological "quilting", as it fixes its meaning.²⁶¹ In Pathak's videos the quilting point is seen to emerge at the end of the narrative, endowing the preceding occurrences with a structure of meaning. *Churi Jo Khanki*, *Mera Kajal*, and *Meri Chunar Ud Ud Jaye* are cases in point. In *Churi Jo Khanki*, the video centers around a group of female friends getting dressed to go to a live performance by Falguni Pathak. The entire video focuses on the girls dressing up for the show and practicing their dance moves. The video narrative ends however in one of the girls finding a male admirer in the crowd at the

²⁶⁰ Žižek, Slavoj. *Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso Books, 1989, p. 100

²⁶¹ Žižek (1989) p. 100

concert. In *Mera Kajal*, the much awaited beau arrives in the last twenty seconds of the song and is shown entering the palace, only in time to hold his lover in his arms.

In *Meri Chunar* it is only after the protagonist has dealt with the grief of losing her “friend” (portrayed by Pathak herself) by acquiring another make-believe female friend, that she reciprocates any interest in the male character in the story. Žižek argues that it is imperative to understand the “effect of retroversion” in this relation between the signifier and signified, where meaning cannot be understood to flow in a linear fashion from an initial kernel. Instead there occurs a “radically contingent process of retroactive production of meaning.”(102). Thus the effect of meaning is always produced backwards, “après coup”. (101) Further, the success of the operation of ideological quilting is contained in the extent to which it is able to erase its own traces. The illusion of the always already whole and added-up sense of Pathak's narrative must be retroactively produced at the end of the video, in order for it to sustain the deviant trajectories of meaning that harbor queer and dissident spectatorial identifications.

Where is there space, one might ask, for the queer identification to emerge in these narratives? Could there be something more, in excess of this “totalizing” gesture of signification authored by Pathak that might allow for alternative readings? Similar to the earlier discussions of Butler’s configurations of agency and Ahmed’s conceptualizations of stranger proximity, the excess can be recognized *as such* not due to its distance or difference from the familiar set of meanings within the videos, but in fact due to its proximity with them. The queer gaze is produced and sustained on the very stage that the heteropatriarchal and tradition-driven narrative fashions itself, through the strategic deployment of excess. The repetitive ways in which Pathak’s narratives reinstate

heteropatriarchal ideals and relationships becomes in the logic of her stories, a conventional banality. Pathak's videos are sites that are infused with female desire and the intensification of anticipation. However, more often than not the (male) objects of their affections do not appear on screen till the very end of the narrative. Meanwhile the desire or anticipation for this proper object-choice is encouraged, contained and absorbed by the homosociality that pervades in Pathak's stories. The heterosexual nature of the women's desire is not always immediately obvious in these narratives. Indeed, sometimes the events culminate in the protagonist finally accomplishing her goal of attending a Falguni Pathak concert, where Pathak is shown performing on stage to a very enthusiastic on-screen audience, while the heterosexual plot, inevitable as it is, functions clearly as a side-show. So Pathak can be seen as employing the veteran viewer's knowledge of Bollywood narrative conventions of heterosexual pairing in order to foreground various other relationships and desires.

In the video for the song *Meri Chunar Ud Ud Jaye*, similar ideological contestations and oppositional scopical pleasures emerge, while Pathak's female masculinity is variously explained, avowed or disavowed by her viewers. Her videos repeatedly use stock motifs like coming of age, childhood/adolescence, dreams, fantasy using animation and historical time in order to create a safe space for viewers to suspend disbelief and invest in the internal reason of the plot. The setting for this song-narrative is the feudal backdrop of a country mansion with its attendant regalia and discipline. A young girl arrives at this mansion where she is under the strict eye of the lady of the house. She spends all her hours inside the house dreaming about the past. This past is animated by flashbacks which show the young girl and Pathak walking, playing and

posing for photographs in an idyllic hilly place. Posing for photographs becomes a way in which the imagined gaze of a viewer-voyeur is evoked. These photographs testify to the homosocial bond between the two women, while also revealing the underlying anxiety on the part of this omniscient yet illusory photographer who feels compelled to document the private moments shared between the two women in this idyllic abandon. Together with Pathak's visible masculinity, which appears in sharp contrast to the adolescent and nubile femininity of her friend, this scene seems to tread the edge of erotic desire between the couple. There is indeed confusion that surfaces at this point for the viewer pertaining to the nature of the relationship of the two women.²⁶² The photographs then are surely a product of and an incitement to discourse, whereby the two women must render themselves knowable and their relationship intelligible and transparent to the audience-citizens.²⁶³

Back in the present, the young protagonist is seen to lament the absence of her friend, to only be rejuvenated by the transference of her grief and desire onto the woman in the painting on her bedroom wall. In repeating the same activities and basic structure of the relationship between Pathak and her, within this new friendship, the girl is able to resolve or find some relief from her sense of loss. A certain level of secrecy envelopes this relationship with the imaginary friend. It is only when this new bond has been forged that the girl is seen to direct any desire towards the boy in the house. Indeed it is her fantasy about her woman friend/lover in which her desire forever remains unfulfilled, but

⁵⁹ A user on youtube.com complains, "I don't get this video. Is Falguni supposed to be a dude here? Like Ayesha's [the actress playing the young woman protagonist] boyfriend who moved away?" The comment appears under the youtube.com username MarvelSinister, 2010

²⁶³ See Foucault, Michel *History of Sexuality Vol.1* (1978) for a discussion of biopower and the proliferation of discourse about sexuality as endemic to the institutionalization of sexuality as an aspect of personhood as well as an area of state regulation and normalization.

is certainly “constituted” and learns how to desire in the first place. The heterosexual pairing that is made inevitable in Pathak's narratives, this time openly acknowledges the simultaneity of the same sex relationship with the heterosexual one. The protagonist's acceptance of the young boy is made contingent on his learning of her secret relationship with the woman in the painting. So in this instance as well, the heteronormative fiction is guaranteed by the presence of queer/same sex desire.

Ambiguous Modalities of Subversion

To develop the theme of excess further, the flush of colors, the infantile aesthetic of the female protagonists, the fantastical (mostly signaling a feudal era) setting, the pathos of her lyrics and the surfeit of female desire in all of Pathak's videos are all familiar to any cinephile as conventions familiar to the melodramatic genre that is popular with Bollywood audiences. Replicating the thematic concerns of Bollywood melodramas of the time, these videos often contained a small sub-plot that played out the battle between notions of “traditional” Indian (sometimes marked by regional Gujarati cultural inflections) femininity and Western femininity, with the former always prevailing as morally and aesthetically sound.²⁶⁴ The staging of this ideological contestation is also tied to the anxieties produced by “Westernization” under liberalization of mass media. Along with the array of satellite televisual programming that exposed Indian audiences to the global youth culture of MTV, came fears of cultural imperialism and destruction of Indian values by consumerism. However, the unprecedented growth of Indian television in the mid-to-late 1990s, and the successful

²⁶⁴ See Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willeman, *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema*, new rev. ed., London: BFI/Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 312.

“indigenization” of programming (Star TV faced competition from Zee TV, and MTV was countered by Channel V) seemed to prove the Indian public’s resistance to cultural invasion and change. Madhava Prasad argues that the point of contention was no longer culture itself, “so much as a struggle between competing foreign and indigenous capitals.”²⁶⁵ In Pathak’s video for *Main Teri Prem Diwani* (“I am Crazy For Your Love”) an intertextual dialogue between Western and Indian modes of representations of femininity is set up as the female protagonist tries to win the affections of her love interest. Although this video centers the heterosexual couple within the narrative, it should be noted that Pathak is once again positioned as the confidante of the protagonist. In her repeated attempts to seduce her lover, the protagonist dons various costumes over the course of the video and enacts her desire for him in a burlesque-like performance. The first two costumes and routines performed by the lead woman, clearly reference the films *Moulin Rouge* (2001) and *The Mummy* (1999), and thus signal flamboyant, global femininities. The lead male character as audience and target consumer of this femininity rejects it, sending the woman back to her confidante Pathak for the next, better idea. As the ultimate solution, Pathak presents the lead female character with a couple of Dandiya sticks. Needing no further cues from movie posters (as was the case with the first two costumes), the lead woman dresses in a ghaghra and choli and invites her love-interest to dance Dandiya with her. This time she is successful in gaining his affections. In this way Pathak deftly allays anxieties about her nonconforming gender performance, by staging the familiar ideological contestation between broader themes apropos of this period of nationalist resurgence within liberalization. Pathak’s videos are texts that are attentive to

²⁶⁵ Madhava Prasad, “Television and the National Culture”, *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, no. 32-33 New Delhi: Tulika Press, April 1999, pp. 119- 129)

their own formal and aesthetic components and, almost without exception reproduce or cite cinema, performance, masquerade and/or stardom within the videos themselves, in an effective enactment of cultural citizenship. The excessive-to-the-point-of camp aesthetic and the fantastical, unlikely and often accessorial nature of the heterosexual plot in the majority of her videos, and above all the conscious self-reflexivity of the formal and aesthetic elements of her videos, make Pathak's videos open to a reading of them as parodic texts.

It could of course, be argued that Pathak's omniscience, her self-positioning as narrator in these videos, functions as the ideological quilting point, in that she oversees the suturing of feminine desire into the conventions of the national, Hindu heterosexual matrix. Her own gender non-conforming presentation (especially within conventions of public/popular culture femininity), produces a queerness that is unavoidable. Her use of an aesthetic of excess could be seen as the force that is meant to counteract the visibility and excess of her gender inversion and her inability to represent/re-present conventional femininity. And yet, to echo Butler again, Pathak's performance remains a failed repetition of norms, housing within that failure, the potential for agency and a subversive modality of representation. As I have shown above, Pathak's representation fails not so much because it is unable to remain within the bounds of the normative, but because it is so obsessive and deliberate an iteration of norms, so manic a repudiation of the other (which, in this case, includes the deviant self), that it reveals the instability of the norm, thereby subverting it. Pathak's use of camp invite a "historically and geopolitically located cultural strategy" of reading visual texts that is "intimately familiar with, engaged

with, and invested in the subject of its critique.”²⁶⁶ A critical reading emerges from within Pathak’s use of recognizable Bollywood heterosexist narrative structures and her audience’s recognition of and pleasure in Bollywood ideological tropes, but in a way that renders heterosexuality incidental. Her own authorial presence in the narrative space of the videos can be read as queer with or without taking into consideration her queer gender presentation due to the ways in which it aligns and misaligns disparate gazes both within and outside the video. Her performance thus, “campily and ambiguously undermines [dominant] identification process and desires.”²⁶⁷

What is striking in those analyzed here and many other videos that feature Falguni Pathak is the tension between the various desires that constantly remain at play, such that there is a simultaneity and conviviality between seemingly adversarial strains of heterosexist and nationalist modes of representation and queer self-expression, within the same visual texts. Unlike Indian LGBT politics and the two-decade long tradition of anthologizing LGBT experiences, critical commentary and aesthetic accomplishment in edited books and curated film festivals, Pathak does not produce or distribute her videos under the identity and sign of “LGBT”. In that way she refuses the task of representation and visibility that might be expected from her by the institutionalized oppositional politics of the Indian LGBT political movement. However, it is noteworthy that Pathak has continued to make videos like this and have national and international sales, and audiences view them without much censure. While some other representations of lesbian/same-sex relationships have been banned and removed from the public eye, as the

²⁶⁶ Desai, Jigna. *Beyond Bollywood : The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film*. New York: Routledge 2003, p. 106-107

²⁶⁷ Desai (2003) p. 110

bearers and markers of the corrupt and degenerate Westernization of Indian society (like Deepa Mehta's film *Fire*), Pathak manages to appease the moral police and yet eke out a queer subjectivity. An article on her in the *Times of India* says: "For the still-single Falguni, her sincerity to her work remains the same irrespective of the fact whether she was performing for a local dandiya show or performing in front of the camera for a video album."²⁶⁸ Having found no particular connection between her career and her marital status, the journalist ends the article with: "'But I will never change my style of dressing for anything in the world,' says Falguni who still sports trousers and shirts while singing the most feminine numbers." Pathak, forever fixed in her gender presentation ("still sports trousers"), unmoved in her marital status ("still single"), and unshaken in her "sincerity to her work", has contributed in the constitution of a queer public.

Conclusion

That cultural and religious nationalism in India has been a repressive force is not under contestation in this chapter. To overcome the Hindu nationalist disavowal of sexual difference and gendered diversity, gay and lesbian political organizing have increasingly come to be associated and measured through legislative reform. The LGBT movement in India advocating the decriminalization of sodomy encapsulates a desire for recognition from the state, which in turn has made the rights-based subject into, what Jasbir Puar calls, "the most potent aphrodisiac of liberalism."²⁶⁹ In this preoccupation with the state,

²⁶⁸ "I Sing From My Heart: Falguni Pathak", *Times of India*, Web, April 23, 2007
<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/hindi/bollywood/news/I-sing-from-my-heart-Falguni-Pathak/articleshow/38060512.cms>

²⁶⁹ Jasbir Puar, "Homonationalism as Assemblage: Viral Travels, Affective Sexualities", *Jindal Global LawReview*, Vol. 4, Issue2, National Capital Region: Jindal Global Law School, November 2013. pp. 23-43

liberal political rhetoric creates a paradigm in which the “progress” of the nation-state, its citizenry and its margins, in globalization, are linked to state legislation. When the legal apparatus fails to grant rights, it is often attributed to Hindu nationalist hegemony and right-wing ideology that is seen as regressive and oppositional to sexual diversity. Thus the desire for the state is seen as more in step with modernity than the attachment to the nation. By insisting on conceptualizing nationalism solely as antithetical to sexual liberation, the way in which nationalist discourse is unevenly taken up by queer people in order to articulate their gendered non-normativities, is neglected. As a result metropolitan LGBT activists and scholars have done little to disaggregate nationalist rhetoric to study how, far from prohibitive, nationalism might often become the constitutive condition for the survival and proliferation of certain queer formations.

This is an observation I have made not merely in service of a more inclusive LGBT agenda that would account for those that have been lured by nationalism. Instead, I have tried to show that a contextual and situated reading of the affective modalities of nationalism and technologies of globalization can illuminate how all subjects of power are positioned in such a way that they produce and sustain that which regulates them. By focusing on Milan Singh and Falguni Pathak, I read these artists’ performances of female masculinity as cultural texts that draw together multiple and conflicting viewing practices that disrupt the simplistic binary of normativity and resistance. Their visual texts demonstrate that the privileging of mobility/fluidity that have become ubiquitously associated with social change in globalization, can function as a one-size-fits-all prescription for effecting change. A fixation on and through nationalism then, pushes back on the progress narratives of global rights-based movements as well as the

fetishization of non-Western gender/sexual difference, and challenges us to re-think the affective attachments and political idioms in which we currently conceive of resistance.

Conclusion

“All your mothers must have warned you that a tick on the udder of a cow never sucks milk, always blood.” – “The Complete Works of Somehswar P. Balendu”,

by Qamar Roshanabadi (1999)²⁷⁰

In my dissertation so far, I have argued that female masculinity can act as a productive analytical lens through which to reconsider the politics of visibility and state recognition mounted by the LGBT movement in India. In particular, this is an interrogation of how difference is managed and negotiated between hegemonic culture and masculine identified gender nonconforming people, in ways that might challenge current perceptions of what constitutes the categories of politics, normativity, and resistance. In the sociopolitical context of liberalization in northern India, the collusions of globalization, Hindu nationalism, and the mainstream LGBT movement, complicate polarized scripts of dominance and marginality, and reveal that an intersectional analytical approach is necessary to account for the ways in which social hierarchies are replicated and existing hegemonic structures consolidated within the LGBT social movement.

That Hindu nationalism has been a project that is fundamentally imagined through the disciplining and cultural signification of women's bodies has been eminently theorized by many postcolonial Indian feminists. However, of interest here has been the coterminous relationship between Hindu nationalism and Hindu masculinity, in that the

²⁷⁰ Qamar Roshanabadi, “The Complete Works of Someshwar P. Balendu” in *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writings from India* (ed). Ashwini Sukthankar, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1999. pp. 271

material and symbolic power gained by the nationalist movement is seen as directly proportionate to or reflective of the hegemonic success of the latter, as well as the inverse. Following Judith Butler's groundbreaking theorization of the reliance of gendered norms on citation and repetition, I have argued that in order to retain this hegemony and secure participation in the masculinization of Hindu nationalism, the discourse of 'masculinity in crisis' has been used to ensure a reinvestment and repetition of gendered norms within Hindu nationalism. The rhetoric of crisis yields some predictable results such as producing new and heterogeneous 'others' against whose onslaught Hindu masculinity and the nation must be protected; but also some unpredictable ones in that those very 'others' (masculine gnc in our context) might be incorporated into the logic of the Hindu nationalism and serve to stabilize its hegemony.

These uneven imbrications of "the center and the margin" and their potential to denaturalize the terms upon which gender/sexual identity movements have conceived their struggles is especially visible through the lens of female masculinity as an analytic. In Chapter 2 I detailed the need to not only proliferate an idea of gender diversity by focusing on the experiences of masculine gender nonconforming people, but also to develop an understanding of those experience as substantively altering and/or challenging existing ideas about gender in India. Focusing less on narratives of marginality and more on the modalities of negotiation with power, I demonstrate the proximities and overlap between that which is said to oppress and that which is said to liberate us. Specifically, I consider male masculinity, class hierarchies, religious affinities and militant nationalism as spaces where complex encounters between normativity and nonconformity are staged

and political action is imagined that is not legible within the politics of visibility and representation.

The concept of intersectionality as a way to apprehend the workings of power and the experience of difference has come under renewed debate within feminist studies in the US and in India. It has been a helpful concept within academia as well as more on-the-ground movements. Most recently, it has ignited fresh debate among Indian feminists, some of whom have criticized intersectionality as a US-centric concept that loses its critical edge and applicability for subaltern populations in India due to its uptake within international development agencies such as the United Nations (UN). In her essay “Is Feminism About ‘Women’?” Nivedita Menon argues that within such top-down transnational circuits of knowledge, theories of intersectionality are now under risk of becoming tools of governmentality and “gender mainstreaming” that do not reflect the particular histories of women’s movements in India.²⁷¹ “Woman” she contends, has never been a single-axis category within postcolonial feminism in India and thus intersectionality is a redundant concept in that context. Along with her interlocutor Mary E. John, in this dissertation I have argued that Menon’s own call to produce or use *located* theories would illuminate the various ways in which mainstream Indian feminism and its institutional gains have not addressed power asymmetries sufficiently.²⁷² Examples of exclusion of masculine women and transmen from feminist theoretical and

²⁷¹ Nivedita Menon, “Is Feminism About ‘Women’?: A Critical View of Intersectionality from India”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol - L No. 17, April 25, 2015. p.37

²⁷² Mary E. John, “Intersectionality: Rejection or Critical Dialogue?”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. L No. 33, August 15, 2015, p. 74.

political worlds have been provided elsewhere in this dissertation and have hopefully proven Menon's claim to be premature. However, there are some crucial ways in which the concept of female masculinity might also enrich the debate about the efficacy of intersectionality in naming power and difference. By simultaneously occupying marginality (being gender nonconforming) as well as masculine privilege at times, female masculinity evidences the fallacy of neat distinctions between oppressed and oppressor. Female masculinity as the central analytic enables us to go further than demonstrating the multiplicity of axes of oppression, to reveal the complicities of the oppressed in the oppressive. Further, it exhibits the contingent nature of identity formation itself wherein markers of identity are often co-constitutive rather than discrete and self-certain elements intersecting. Lastly, what intersectionality does very much help address in this project, are the ways in which mainstream LGBT discourses construct certain embodiments and political modalities as resistant and modern, and others not quite.

In Chapter 3, I focused on one facet of these temporalities of power and resistance within LGBT discourse. In privileging legal remedy as the path to LGBT visibility, legibility and livability, the LGBT political movement privileges an attachment to the biopolitical state as arbiter of LGBT legitimacy. The concomitant political action thus takes the shape of increased visibility of gender/sexual "minorities" and the neoliberal glorification of coming out, collective Pride parades and organized LGBT events, all aimed to garner visibility. The idea behind such forms of protest is founded on a hypothesis of repression by the nation-state and nationalist discourses, to use Foucauldian terms, and house within them the desire for rights and dignity through state recognition. In this context, political or affective attachments to national identity as a way to find

legitimacy are cast as an irrevocable fixation on traditionalism and conservatism that are both inimical to LGBT liberation. Inevitably, these fixations are also seen as characteristics of non-metropolitan publics, and not the civil society of the secular and democratic state of India. While fully recognizing the violence inherent in projects of nationhood, I have argued that to disavow and relegate attachments to tradition, nationhood and nationalism in the name of modernity, progress and development performs its own classed violence of casting those who might depend on such messy affective ties for their survival. Thus, I theorize the masculine gnc fixation on/imbrication in nationalism as a way to understand the divergent temporalities of politics that interrupt developmentalist narratives of liberation by state recognition, rather than simply a case of bad faith or regressive politics.

As a conclusion, I offer thoughts on some fissures that arise amidst theorizations of female masculinity as an analytical lens, while also being a category that is tethered to extremely vulnerable bodies. Where does the analytic end and the bodies/lives persist? I explore this question by returning to an issue that was introduced at the outset – that of sexual variance and its social life in queer politics. While gender is largely understood to be a social construct, more pliable and fluid an era of “queer rights,” sex is thought of as a largely inalterable constant, unless of course it involves the momentous occasion of transgender surgeries. Below I consider the challenges of apprehending female masculinity with particular emphasis on transmasculine subjectivity.

Transmasculine Identity, Terminology, and Concluding Questions

Over the course of the past year or so, another vestige of the biology-gender-sexuality debate has come to the fore with the favorable judgment given by the Supreme

Court of India on April 15, 2014 in response to a petition filed by the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA), that “Recognition of transgenders as a third gender is not a social or medical issue but a human rights issue.” Although widely welcomed as a progressive and much-needed judgment in recognition of the distinct rights and provisions required by transgender and transsexual people, the judgment opened up intense social media debate on the absence of female-to-male (FTM) and transman identities in its pages. Save for a brief discussion on the need for more research on transman identity (included after a last minute consultation with an expert committee involving six transfeminine and/or ciswomen and two transman identified people, set up by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment {MSJE}), there is no mention of procedures, provisions and safeguards for transmasculine people. The judgment did, however, use the term PAGFB (Persons Assigned Gender Female at Birth) coined by an LBT activist group based in Bombay called LABIA.²⁷³ The details of the judgment aside, the use of this term in itself became a point of debate within groups of masculine gender nonconforming people, on social media, upon who this term was thrust – the first of its kind attempting to describe or at least account for, female masculinity in India. In an open letter sent to MSJE by an unprecedented seventy-four transmen from all over the country, including myself, we wrote:

We, as trans men admire and respect the courage of our trans sisters who have led the way for LGBTI rights in India. We are learning to organize ourselves from them and are in the process of doing that. Just like there are hijras, kinnars, mangalamukhis, aravanis, kothis, jogappas, shiv shaktis among trans women as identities, there is a wide range of trans masculine expressions. Some of us have had surgery, some of us haven't, some of

²⁷³ LABIA. “Breaking the Binary: Understanding concerns and realities of queer persons assigned gender female at birth across a spectrum of lived gender identities”, Bombay: LABIA, 2012

us are more masculine, others are more fluid in their gender expression. We have many names to identify ourselves like bhaiya, thirunambi, gandabasaka, babu, ftm, trans man, etc. For an umbrella term, to refer to us in all our diversity, we would like the use of the term, trans masculine. We do not identify with PAGFB [Persons Assigned Gender Female at Birth] which is what is being used in reports and meetings here to describe our identities. We strongly urge you to refer to us by identities that we assume, not ones that are imposed on us without due democratic discussions and consent.

Other problems that were identified with this term was that it is biologically deterministic in that it tethers identity descriptors to sex/gender assignment at birth, when the subject has no say about their own gender. It also conflates sex and gender in the ambiguous and confusing formulation “gender female assigned at birth.” Further, the researchers at LABIA write, “This assigned gender may or may not match a person's own sense of hir/their gender. All respondents in this study are PAGFB though not all of them belong to the "female gender" or consider themselves women just like all PAGMB may not be of the "male gender" or call themselves men. Together the two terms include all persons and every variation in gender and of body.”²⁷⁴ The claim that “together the two terms include all persons and every variation in gender and of body” violently erases the experiences of trans persons, gender queer persons, inter gender persons and intersex people whose relationship with their assigned genders is varied and complex, and wherein for some, any reference to assigned or imposed genders as terms to describe them results in dysphoria and discomfort.²⁷⁵

In one of the social media discussions where another trans identified person argued that PAGFB is not meant as an identity, but as a descriptor, I found myself

²⁷⁴ LABIA, 2012.

²⁷⁵ I am indebted for this perspective to personal communication with trans activist Gee Imaan Semmalar in April 2014.

making the argument that “we first need to remember that we have to work with categories that mark a difference. A difference that we are trying hard to articulate in order for particular erasures and violences to be addressed, especially when seeking intervention by governmental agencies. So in that context, PAGFB blunts our argument as it includes cis/non-dysphoric/non-Trans-presenting and possibly woman identified persons within its purview, for whom bathrooms, jobs, etc. are not an issue on account of gender nonconformity. So that creates the need for something that marks gender transgression.” Having argued this, I subsequently questioned if I was in fact the author of my own dissertation, for here I was attempting to discipline, articulate and apprehend the parameters of precisely that which I have been attempting to keep open-ended and infuse with possibility. The questions I came out asking myself are probably familiar to many who are poised precariously between the worlds of theoretical analysis and flights of imagination on the one hand, and the materiality and pain of living as gender nonconforming on the other. Does female masculinity as an analytic perform the same violence that interpretive categories such as PAGFB produce? On the other hand, what are the limits of the demand for self-ascription and marginality/agency in narratives of identity? How might female masculinity, as an analytic, attend to both the materiality of difference and its ethical imperative – to remain a site of cultural resignification?

Trans Surgeries and the Blood Sucking Tick

It is worth noting that contemporary articulations of female masculinity as trans identity have focused a lot on the medicalization and pathologization of the trans body in its narratives of trans identity. That is to say, transman and FTM identity in India in the last two years has come to narrate itself around the much anticipated and often foreclosed

event of the sex reassignment/affirming surgeries and/or access to hormones. This is partly due to the prohibitive costs of the surgery and the lack of knowledge and care even within medical establishments in the country about gender transitions. Partly, this also has to do with the fact that, especially given the prohibitive nature of transitioning, the moment of surgery, the decision to get it done and the journey through hormonal transition is one that is framed as a superlative act of agency and choice.

In a brilliant reframing of the question of transexual choice around transitioning, David Valentine interrogates why sex reassignment surgeries are framed as exemplary acts of choice that are incommensurate and impossible analogies with all other body modification surgeries.²⁷⁶ In order to determine the cultural significance of transexual surgeries, he turns the question of choice on its head and asks, “why do non-transexuals choose not to have gender reassignment surgeries?” He writes,

“[I]f we frame the desire not to have SRS *as* a desire and as an act of agency, then it could also be revealed as a desire to hold onto the sexed and gendered meanings that accrete to non-transexual bodies. That desire might be seen as a desire to participate in the binarized economy of difference that supports the edifice of modern subjectivity but transsexuality –*sotto voce*–is seen to be responsible for. Without this move, binary gender becomes the ground for non-transexuals’ naturalized experience of somatic completeness, against which the figure of the transsexual must explain itself.”

Valentine’s formulation helps to dislodge trans surgeries from a place of irreconcilable and incommensurate difference and instead read them alongside a range of gendered embodiments and self-making discourses that infuse modern life in India. I want to build on this analysis by challenging the notion of the psychological exceptionality of trans

²⁷⁶ David Valentine, “Sue E. Generous: Toward a Theory of Non-Transsexuality”, *Feminist Studies* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2012) pp. 185-211

surgeries and re-narrating the decision to be surgically modified as acts of self-definition that exist alongside (if not analogically) otherly gendered experiences and self-making moments. To make this clearer, I turn to very briefly to Qamar Roshanabadi's short story, "The Complete Works of Someshwar P. Balendu."²⁷⁷

"The Complete Works of Someshwar P. Balendu" can easily be read for an irreverent rejection of the developmental discourse of gender transitioning. Though the story centers the tropes of alterity, movement and transformation, it refuses to fall into a causal master narrative of the trans body and its relationship of marginality to the heteronorm. The story works as an autobiography of the fictional title character Someshwar, threading together his life marked by a transformation. "As soon as I was old enough to find out where it could be done, I had my breasts cut off. Do not ask how I got the money, I will not tell you", he says.²⁷⁸ A proud bearer of a formidably long name, Someshwar refuses to afford us any comprehensibility of his 'true' identity or any elaborate narrative about how he came to make the decision to have the surgery, where he raised the money, where he found out how to do it and so on. He remains intractable all the while mocking the reader's expectations of what a Someshwar P. Balendu would be like. His 'complete works' refuse the transparency and aggrieved confessionals expected from the transgender body.

The argument could certainly be made, and perhaps rightly so, that the reason a figure like Someshwar is able to dismiss the decision and process of surgery is because as

²⁷⁷ Qamar Roshanabadi, "The Complete Works of Someshwar P. Balendu" in *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writings from India* (ed). Ashwini Sukthankar, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1999. pp. 267-283

²⁷⁸ Roshanabadi, p. 271

an upper-caste, middle class metropolitan, genderqueer subject, he has much easier access to surgery than other trans people in India – the same types of people he turns into metaphors in the excerpt below. Although it is clear from the short story that the character experiences immense dysphoria, loneliness, social ostracization and financial hardships, there is no question that a dalit transman, for example, would experience this process very differently. Bearing this in mind, it is still nevertheless important to consider that it is in fact the demographic that Someshwar belongs to that comprised a majority of the group of transmasculine petitioners against the NALSA judgment of 2014 discussed above. That is to say, that while it is not up for debate that social transformation can only occur if equal access to healthcare and self-determination is made available across class and caste, my task here is to complicate the political scripts transmasculine subjects play out in the public sphere. Someshwar's narrative choice of de-centering the event of the surgery from his purported life-story reveals an alternative aesthetic and political path for transgender people. It is one that refuses to let the transmasculine experience be circumscribed and flattened yet again into dysphoria and constitutive lack. As a narrative device this refusal contains further possibilities of understanding, indeed apprehending, gendered norms and scripts.

Although subjected to all manner of gendered scrutiny and disciplining, he remains contemptuous of the gendered conventions that are supposed to govern the lives of middle class women. Before letting the reader into his transformative, if painful, experience with the surgery, he narrates a haunting moment of being sexually molested and raped in a train as a young ~~girl~~. In ways very similar to his narration of his surgery, he does not tarry on the event of the rape in his story. This is particularly striking as rape,

within contemporary middle class Indian culture, is the overdetermined threat of gendered experience of public space. Not only is the dread and threat of rape thought to structure feminine participation in public life, it is also concomitantly a measure of the modern nation-state's ability to enact gender-justice and democracy. For Someshwar, however, it is something that begged a mention, nothing more, nothing less, thus again refusing to be assigned the role of the rapable, victim body.

His family is certainly a site of routine institutionalized surveillance and coercion and he takes the first opportunity to exit that world in order to live alone in a rented room – the money for which, he lets us know sarcastically, comes from his family. His exit from his family is followed by long periods of loneliness, lying naked on a cot, drinking tea, listening to All India Radio and staring longingly at billboards with Bollywood heroes posing as varied archetypes of Bollywood masculinity – the soldier, the romantic lover, and so on.

It is Someshwar's recognition of the plasticity and the stylized nature of his nonconforming gender that compels him to take on the filmic persona of Ajeeb Ashiq (Strange Lover) in order to heal and hone his masculinity. The rifle-toting Ajeeb Ashiq that Someshwar models himself on, is an archetypal cinematic figure born in a particular moment in postcolonial Indian cinema that represented an ideal Indian masculinity that would inspire and motivate the men of the nation as it went to war with China and Pakistan in the decades following independence. The militaristic and fierce image of Ajeeb Ashiq is the type of hyper-masculine figure that Someshwar must identify with and model himself on, so as to become legible in his gender. At the same time, it's on one of these occasions when he finds himself hanging around under these billboards smoking his

cigarette that he encounters a new friend – a hijra sex worker. And so begins his life as a sex worker and a favorite presence in the hijra circles who take him under their wing, as he pleases the neighborhood wives for a living.

At once self-conscious of the integral role of performance and narrativity for identity, he ends his story by enacting a flamboyant exit, but promising to persist,

“With a final back-bending, waist-bowing, floor-sweeping kathak-dancer tasleem, I will now request ijaazat...Look behind and you may see me following you, like the hunger of orphans, the stare of zoo animals, the smell of poor people. I have no choice but to be faithful to my nature. All your mothers must have warned you that a tick on the udder of a cow never sucks milk, always blood.”²⁷⁹

In playing out this dramatic exit, Someshwar spells out the threat he embodies to extant social structures. His assertion of his own “nature” as a gender nonconforming outlier denaturalizes bourgeois heteronormativity (from which he is banished by his family) in the same stroke as his promise to linger despite understanding that he is perceived as strange and unwanted.

To conclude this dissertation here too then seems apt, as Someshwar provides us with a way to think about the limits and the possibilities of female masculinity. Refusing intelligibility and transparency, he nevertheless invites the reader into an interpretative framework that is committed to holding in productive tension the gendered scripts through which one might become oneself, not privileging any one injury over another. He points us to the ways in which one might often live and appear as gender nonconforming not despite, but because of, hegemonic power, thereby compelling us to rethink our

²⁷⁹ Roshanabadi, p. 283 Translations: Kathak – a classical north Indian dance form, Tasleem – salutation, Ijaazat – permission.

political investment in dichotomies of normativity and resistance. And thus perhaps most significantly, he leaves us with a queer politics that does not fetishize mutation, fluidity and easy models of “resistance,” but rather, is that tick who remains utterly aware of the terms of its existence and yet endures.

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